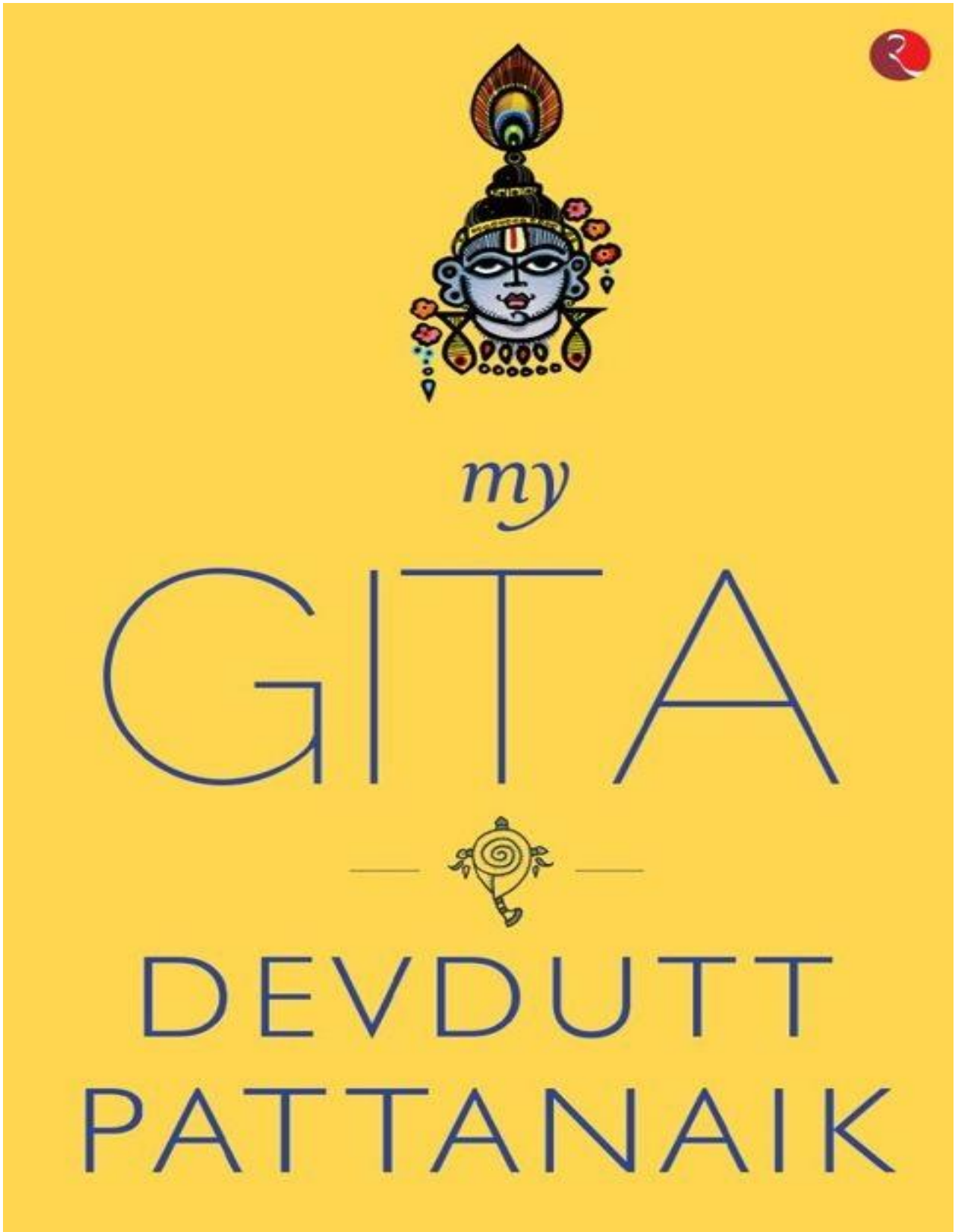

my GITĀ

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MY गीता GĪTĀ

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PATTANĀIK

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To my friends Partho, who listens Paromita, who sees

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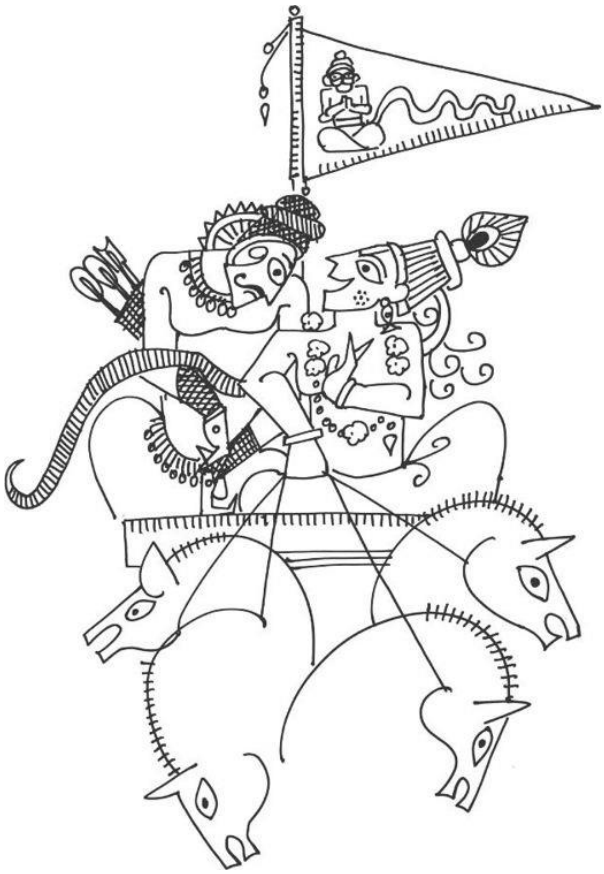
Why *My Gītā*

The Bhagavad Gītā, or The Gītā as it is popularly known, is part of the epic Mahābhārata.

The Bhagavad Gītā

The epic describes the war between the Pāṅdavas and the Kauravas on the battlefield of Kuru- kśetra. The Gītā is the discourse given by KṚṢṆA to Arjuna just before the war is about to begin. KṚṢṆA is identified as Bhagavān (God). His words contain the essence of Vedic wisdom, the keystone of Hinduism.



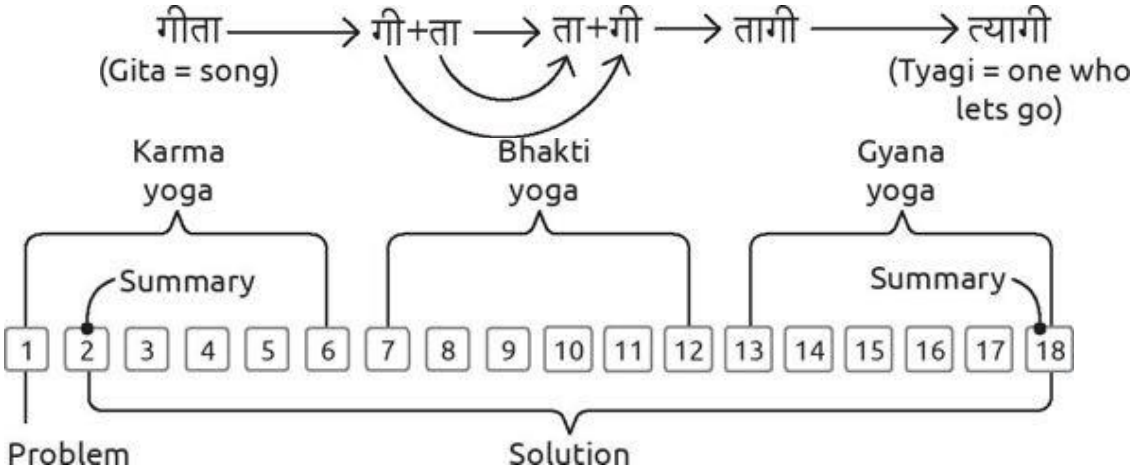
RāmaKṚṢṆA Paramhansa, the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic, said that the essence of The Gītā can be deciphered simply by reversing the syllables that constitute Gītā. So Gītā, or gi-tā, becomes tā-gi, or Tyāgī, which means 'one who lets go of possessions.'

Gi-tā to Tā-gi

Given that, it is ironical that I call this book 'My Gītā'. I use the possessive pronoun for three reasons.

Reason 1: *My Gītā* is thematic

The Gītā demonstrates many modern techniques of communication. First, Arjuna's problem is presented (Chapter 1), and then KṚṢṆA's solution (chapters 2 to 18) is offered. कृष्ण KṚṢṆA begins by telling Arjuna what he will reveal (Chapter 2); he then elaborates on what he promised to tell (chapters 3 to 17); and finally, he repeats what he has told (Chapter 18). KṚṢṆA's solution involves **analysis (sāṅkhya)** and **synthesis (yoga)**—slicing the whole into parts and then binding the parts into a whole. The solution itself is comprehensive, involving the **behavioural (karma yoga)**, the **emotional (bhakti yoga)** and the **intellectual (gyāna yoga)**. However, no one reads The Gītā as a book, or hears every verse in a single sitting.



Chapter Architecture in The Gītā

Traditionally, a guru would only elaborate on a particular verse or a set of verses or a chapter of The Gītā at a time. It is only in modern times, with a printed book in hand, that we want to read The Gītā cover to cover, chapter by chapter, verse to verse, and hope to work our way through to a climax of resolutions in one go. When we attempt to do so, we are disappointed. For, unlike modern writing, The **Gītā is not linear**: some ideas are scattered over several chapters, many ideas are constantly repeated, and still others

presuppose knowledge of concepts found elsewhere, in earlier **Vedic and Upanishadic texts**. In fact, The Gītā specifically refers to the Brahma sutras (Chapter 13, Verse 5), also known as वेदान्त सुत्र **Vedāṅta sutras**, said to have been composed by one Badarayana, sometimes identified with Vyāsa. Further, at places, the same words are used in different verses to convey different meanings, and at other instances, different words are used to convey the same idea. For example, sometimes the word 'ātmā' means mind and sometimes soul; at other times other words like dehi, brahmana and puruśa are used for soul instead of ātmā. This can be rather disorienting to a casual reader, and open to multiple interpretations.

So *My Gītā* departs from the traditional presentation of The Gītā — sequential verse-by-verse translations followed by commentary. Instead, ***My Gītā* is arranged thematically**. The sequence of themes broadly follows the sequence in The Gītā. Each theme is explained using several verses across multiple chapters. The verses are paraphrased, not translated or transliterated. These paraphrased verses make better sense when juxtaposed with Vedic, Upanishadic and Buddhist lore that preceded The Gītā and stories from the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyāṇa and the Purāṇas that followed it. Understanding deepens further when the Hindu worldview is contrasted with other worldviews and placed in a historical context.

For those seeking the standard literal and linear approach, there is a recommended reading list at the end of the book.

Reason 2: *My Gītā* is subjective

We never actually hear what KṚṢṆA told Arjuna. We simply overhear what Sanjaya transmitted faithfully to the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the comforts of the palace, having witnessed all that occurred on the distant battlefield, thanks to his telepathic sight. The **Gītā we overhear is essentially that which is narrated by a man, with no authority, but infinite sight (Sanjaya), to a man with no sight but full authority (Dhṛtarāṣṭra)**. This peculiar structure of the

narrative draws attention to the **vast gap** between **what is told (gyāna)** and **what is heard (vi- gyāna)**.

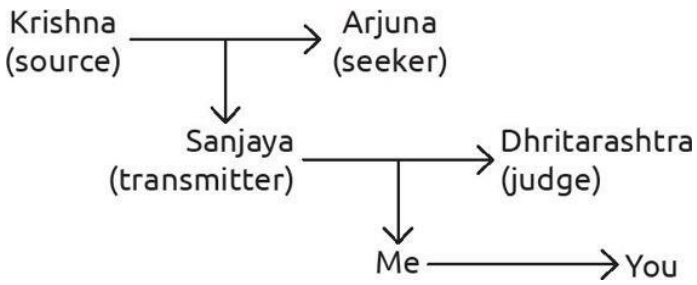
KṚṢṆA and Sanjaya may speak exactly the same words, but while **KṚṢṆA knows what he is talking about**, **Sanjaya does not**. KṚṢṆA is the source, while Sanjaya is merely a transmitter. Likewise, what **Sanjaya hears is different** from **what Arjuna hears** and **what Dhṛtarāṣṭra hears**. Sanjaya hears the words but does not bother with the meaning. **Arjuna is a seeker and so he decodes what he hears to find a solution to his problem**. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is not interested in what KṚṢṆA has to say. While Arjuna asks many questions and clarifications, ensuring the 'discourse' is a 'conversation', Dhṛtarāṣṭra remains silent throughout. In fact, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is fearful of KṚṢṆA who is fighting against his children, the Kauravas. So he **judges KṚṢṆA's words**, accepting what serves him, dismissing what does not.

Overhearing The Gītā

I am not the source of The Gītā. But I do not want to be merely its transmitter, like Sanjaya. I want to understand, like Arjuna, though I have no problem I want to solve; neither do I stand on the brink of any battle. But it has been said that the Vedic **wisdom presented by KṚṢṆA is applicable to all contexts**, not just Arjuna's. So I have spent months hearing The Gītā in the original Sanskrit to appreciate its musicality; reading multiple commentaries, retellings and translations; mapping the patterns that emerge from it with patterns found in Hindu mythology; and comparing and contrasting these patterns with those found in Buddhist, Greek and Abrahamic mythologies. This book contains my understanding of The Gītā, my subjective truth: my Gītā. You can approach this book as Arjuna, with curiosity, or as Dhṛtarāṣṭra, with suspicion and judgement. What you take away will be your subjective truth: your Gītā.

The quest for objective truth (what did KṚṢṆA actually say?) invariably results in vi-vāda — argument — where you try to prove that your truth is the truth and I try to prove that my truth is the truth. The quest for subjective truth (how does The Gītā make sense

to me?) results in sam-vāda, where you and I seek to appreciate each other's viewpoints and expand our respective truths. It allows everyone to discover The Gītā at his or her own pace, on his or her own terms, by listening to the various Gītās around them.



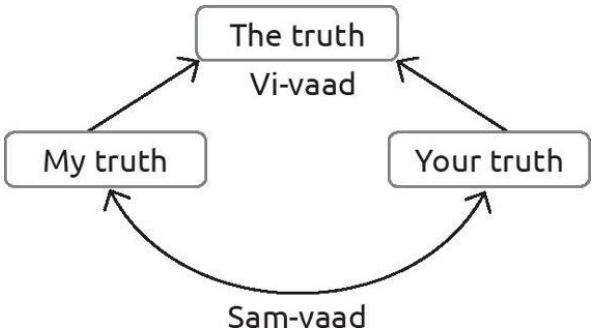
Argument and Discussion

Objectivity is obsessed with exactness and tends to be rather intolerant of deviation, almost like the jealous God of monotheistic mythologies. But meanings change over time, with the personality of the reader, and with context. Subjectivity challenges the assumption that ideas are fixed and can be controlled; it celebrates the fluid. Modern global discourse tends to look at truth qualitatively: it is either true or false. **That which is objective is scientific and true**. That which is subjective is mythic and false. Hindu thought, however, looks at truth quantitatively: everyone has access to a slice (bhāga); the one who sees all slices of truth is Bhagavān. Limited truth is मिथ्या mithyā. Limitless truth is satya. Satya is about including everything and being whole पूर्णम् (purnam). The journey towards limitless truth expands our mind ब्रह्मन (brahmana).

The Gītā itself values subjectivity: after concluding his counsel, KṚṢṆA tells Arjuna to reflect on what has been said, and then do as he feels यथा इचासि तथा कुरु (yathā-ichasi-tathā-kuru). Even Sanjaya, after giving his view on what KṚṢṆA's discourse potentially offers, concludes The Gītā with the phrase 'in my opinion' मतिमम (mati-mama).

Reason 3: *My Gītā* is not obsessed with the self

Traditionally, The Gītā has been presented as a text that focusses on self-realization अत्म ज्ञान (ātma-gyāna). This suits the hermit who isolates himself from society.



This is not surprising, since **most early commentators** and retellers of The Gītā, such as शंकर Śaṅkara, रामानुज Rāmaanuja, माधव Mādhava and ज्ञानेश्वर Dyāneśvara, chose not to be householders. The original Buddhist **monastic order** may not have survived in India, but it did play a key role in the rise and dominance of the Hindu monastic order. The **monastic approach willy-nilly appeals to the modern individualist**, who also seeks self-exploration, self-examination, self-actualization and, of course, selfies.

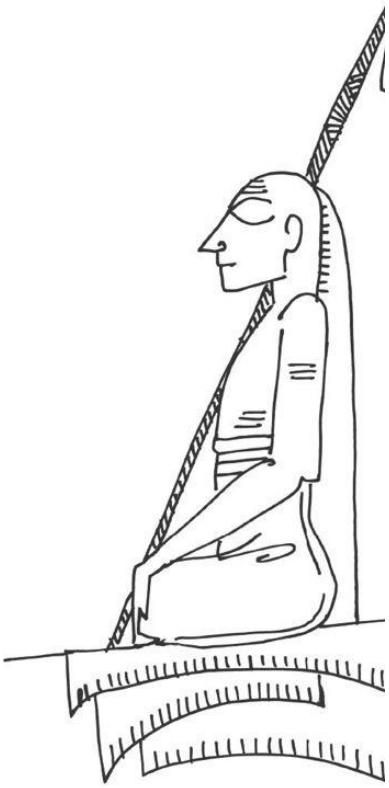
But the **Mahābhārata is about the household**, about relationships, about others. It is essentially about a property dispute. Arjuna's dilemma begins when he realizes that the enemy is family, and he fears the impact of killing family on society as a whole. KṚṢṆA's discourse continuously speaks of yagna, a Vaidika ritual that binds the individual to the community. He elaborates on the relationship of the individual, whom he identifies as जीवात्मा jivātmā, with divinity, whom he identifies as परमात्मा param-ātmā, which is etymologically related to 'the other' (para). The Buddha spoke of nirvana, which means oblivion of individual identity, but KṚṢṆA speaks of brahma-nirvana as an expansion of the mind (brahmana) that leads to liberation (moksha) while ironically also enabling union (yoga), indicating a shift away from monastic isolationism. That is why, in Hindu temples, God is always visualized with the Goddess as a householder, one half of a pair. The devotee looks at the deity (darśan) and the deity, with large unblinking eyes, looks back; the relationship is 'two-way' not 'one-way'

What you and I and the whole world can become Param-ātmā.

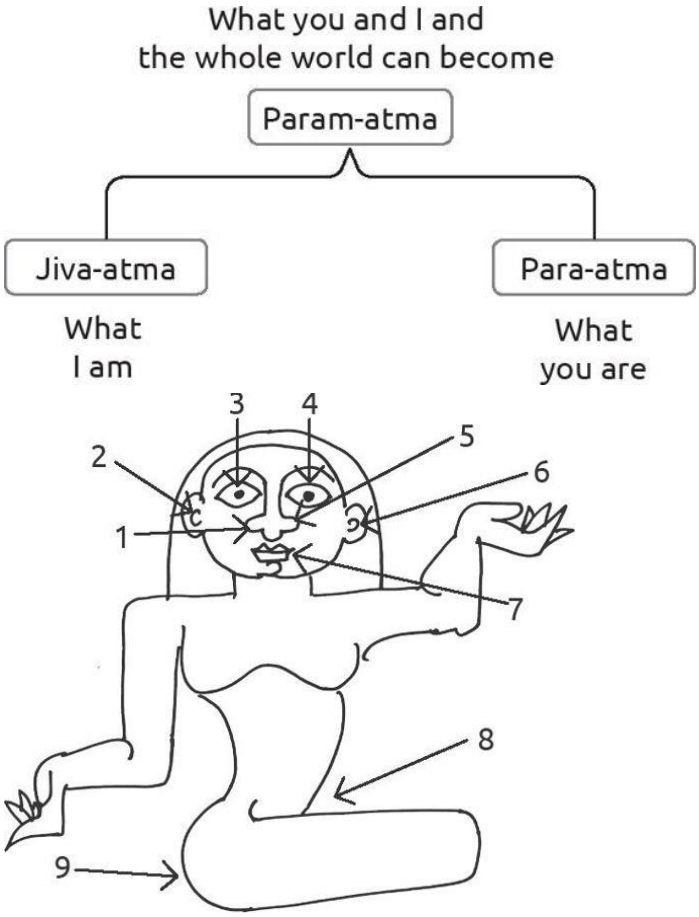
Śaṅkara

But the Mahābhārata is about the household, about relationships, about others. It is essentially about a property dispute. Arjuna's dilemma begins when he realizes that the enemy is family and he fears the impact of killing family on society as a whole. KṚṢṆA's discourse continuously speaks of yagna, a Vedic ritual that binds the individual to the community. He elaborates on the relationship of the individual, whom he identifies as jiva-ātmā, with divinity, whom he identifies as param-ātmā, which is etymologically related to 'the other' (para). The Buddha spoke of nirvana, which means oblivion of individual identity, but KṚṢṆA speaks of brahma-nirvana as an expansion of the mind (brahmana) that leads to liberation (moksha) while ironically also enabling union (yoga), indicating a shift away from monastic isolationism. That is why, in Hindu temples, Bhagavān is always visualized with the Bhagavāndess as a householder, one half of a pair. The devotee looks at the deity (darśan) and the deity, with large unblinking eyes, looks back; the relationship is 'two-way' not 'one-way'.

Relationships



In Chapter 5, Verse 13, of The Gītā, KṚṢṆA describes the human body as a city with **nine gates** (nava-dvāra-pura): two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, one mouth, one anus and one genital. A relationship involves two bodies, two people, the self and the other, you and me, two cities — eighteen gates in all. That The **Gītā has eighteen sections**, that it seeks to make sense of the **eighteen books of the Mahābhārata** — which tells the story of a **war between family and friends fought over eighteen days involving eighteen armies** — indicates that the core teaching of The Gītā has much to do with relationships. It **serves the needs of the householder** rather than the hermit.

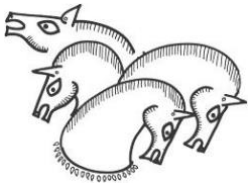


Nine Gates

Before starting on these eighteen chapters we shall briefly explore the history of The Gītā. After these eighteen chapters, we shall discuss the impact of The Gītā on Arjuna.

Writing *My Gītā* helped me expand my mind. I discovered more frameworks through which I could make better sense of reality. I hope reading this book informs your Gītā and helps you expand your mind. Should the urge to find a fixed single objective truth grip you, remind yourself:

Within infinite myths lies an eternal truth Who sees it all?
Varuna has but a thousand eyes Indra, a hundred
You and I, only two.

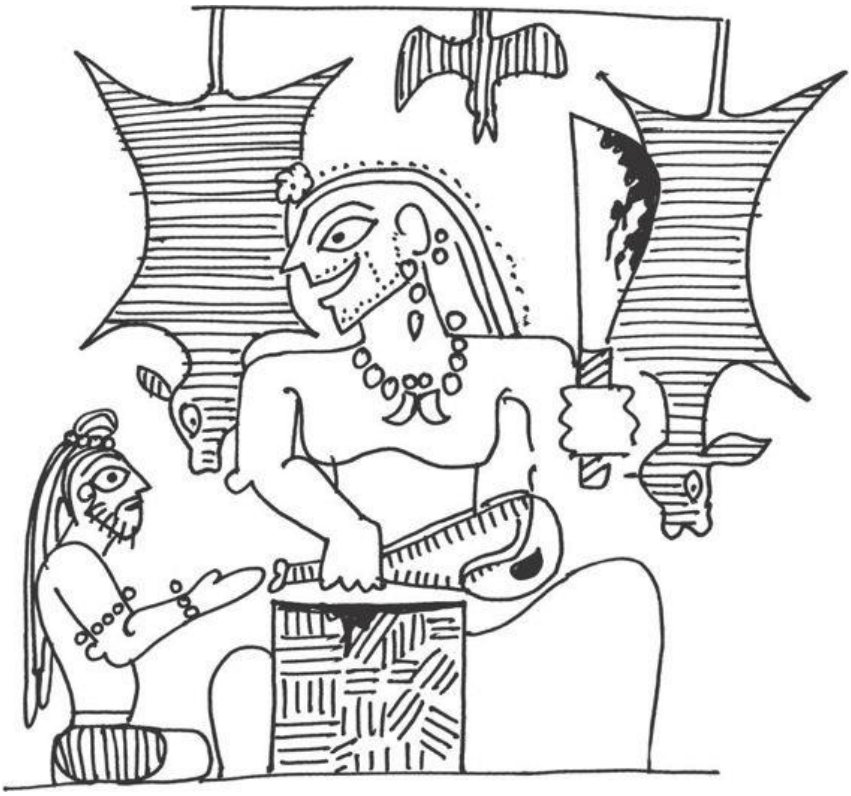


Before *My Gītā*: A Brief History of The Gītā

Before the Bhagavad Gītā, or Bhagavān's song, there was the Vyādha Gītā, or the butcher's song.

Vyādha Gītā

The Vyādha Gītā is found earlier in the Vana Parva, Book 3 of the Mahābhārata, when the Pāṅdavas are still in exile in the forest, having lost their kingdom to the Kauravas in a gambling match. The Bhagavad Gītā is found in:



Bhisma Parva, Book 6 of the Mahābhārata, just before the war between the Pāṅdavas and the Kauravas.

In the forest, the Pāṅdavas encounter the sage Mārkandeya, who tells them the story of a hermit who would burn birds alive with a fiery glance of his eye, if they accidentally dropped excrement on him

while he was meditating. When the hermit threatened to curse a housewife because she kept him waiting for alms while attending to her household chores, she admonished him for his impatience, and advised him to go to learn the secret of the Vedas from a butcher in Mithilā. The butcher's long discourse — the Vyādha Gītā — on dharma, karma and ātmā so moved the hermit that he returned to his home to serve his old parents, whom he had abandoned long ago.

In both the Vyādha Gītā and the Bhagavad-Gītā, the discourse takes place in a violent space: a butcher's shop and a battlefield, respectively. In both, there is a separation of the physical (prakriti) and the psychological (puruśa), which is the hallmark of Vedic wisdom. In both, the householder's way of engagement is valued over the hermit's way of withdrawal.

What distinguishes the Bhagavad Gītā is that it talks explicitly about Bhagavān (Bhagavān) and devotion (bhakti). It marks the transition of the old ritual-based Vedic Hinduism into the new narrative-based Puranic Hinduism.

Approaches to Hindu History

The history of Hinduism spreads over 5,000 years and can be seen in eight phases that telescope into each other. The first is the Indus phase, then come the Vedic phase, the Upanishadic phase, the Buddhist phase, the Puranic phase, the Bhakti phase, the Orientalist phase and finally the modern phase. Relics from the Indus–Saraswati civilization reveal ancient iconography that is considered sacred in Hinduism even today. But much of the knowledge of that period remains speculative. The subsequent three phases constitute Vedic Hinduism, when there were no temples and the idea of Bhagavān was rather abstract. The final four phases constitute Puranic Hinduism, characterized by the rise of temples and belief in a personal Bhagavān, either Śiva , or one of his sons; Viṣṇū, or one of his avatars; or the Bhagavāndess, in her many local forms. We can go so far as to call Vedic Hinduism pre-Gītā Hinduism and Puranic Hinduism post-Gītā, to indicate the pivotal role of The Gītā in Hindu history.

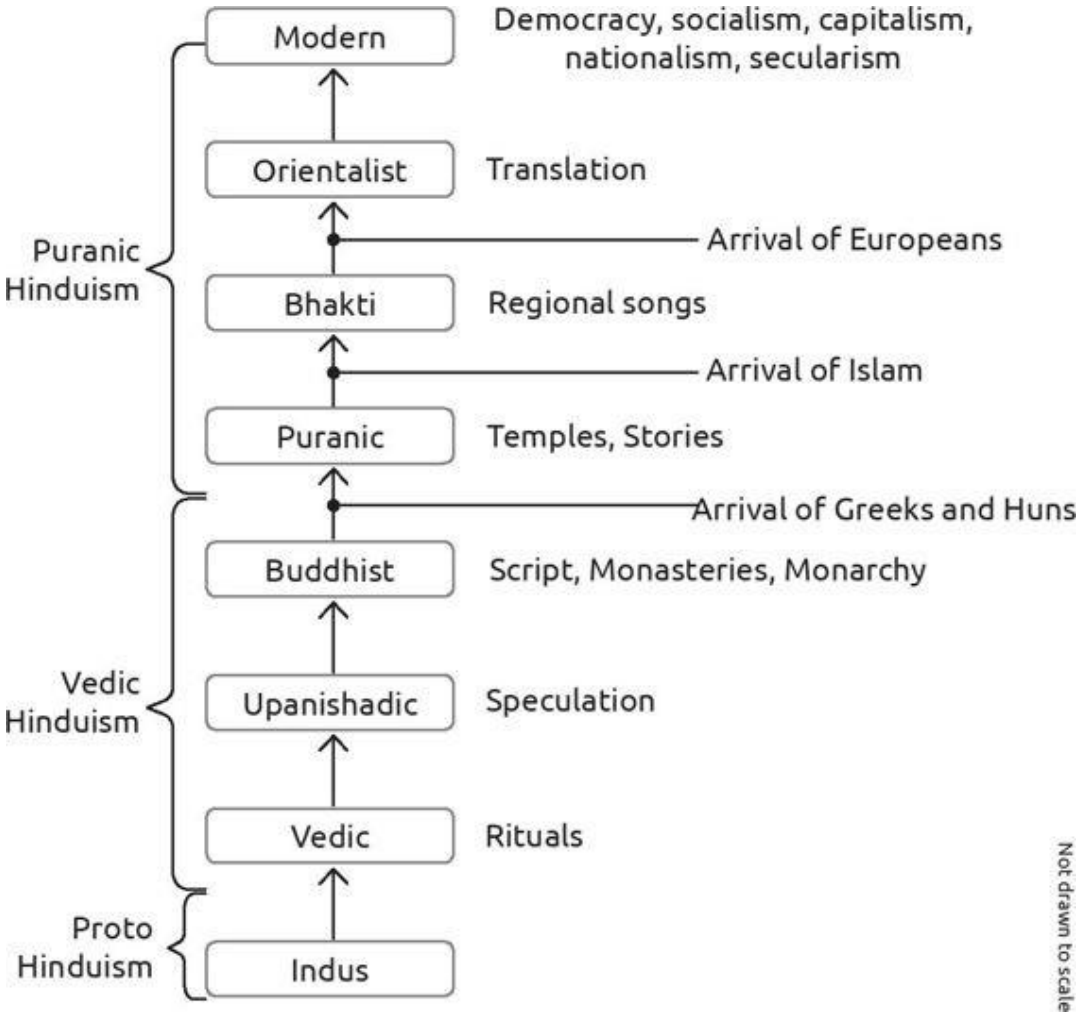
The Vedic phase began 4,000 years ago, the Upanishadic phase 3,000 years ago, the Buddhist phase 2,500 years ago, the Puranic phase 2,000 years ago, the

Bhakti phase 1,000 years ago and the Orientalist phase only 200 years ago. The modern phase is just emerging, with Indians questioning the understanding of Hinduism that has so far been based on Western frameworks.

Dating of Hindu history is always approximate and speculative, and often a range, as orally transmitted scriptures precede the written works by several centuries, and parts of the written work were composed by various scribes over several generations, in different geographies. Everything is complicated by the fact that writing became popular in India only 2,300 years ago, after Mauryan Emperor Ashoka popularized the Brahmi script through his edicts.

Hindu History

Before we proceed, we must keep in mind that the historical approach to Hinduism is not acceptable to all Hindus. The ahistorical school of thought sees all Hindu ideas as timeless. The rather chauvinistic proto-historical school sees



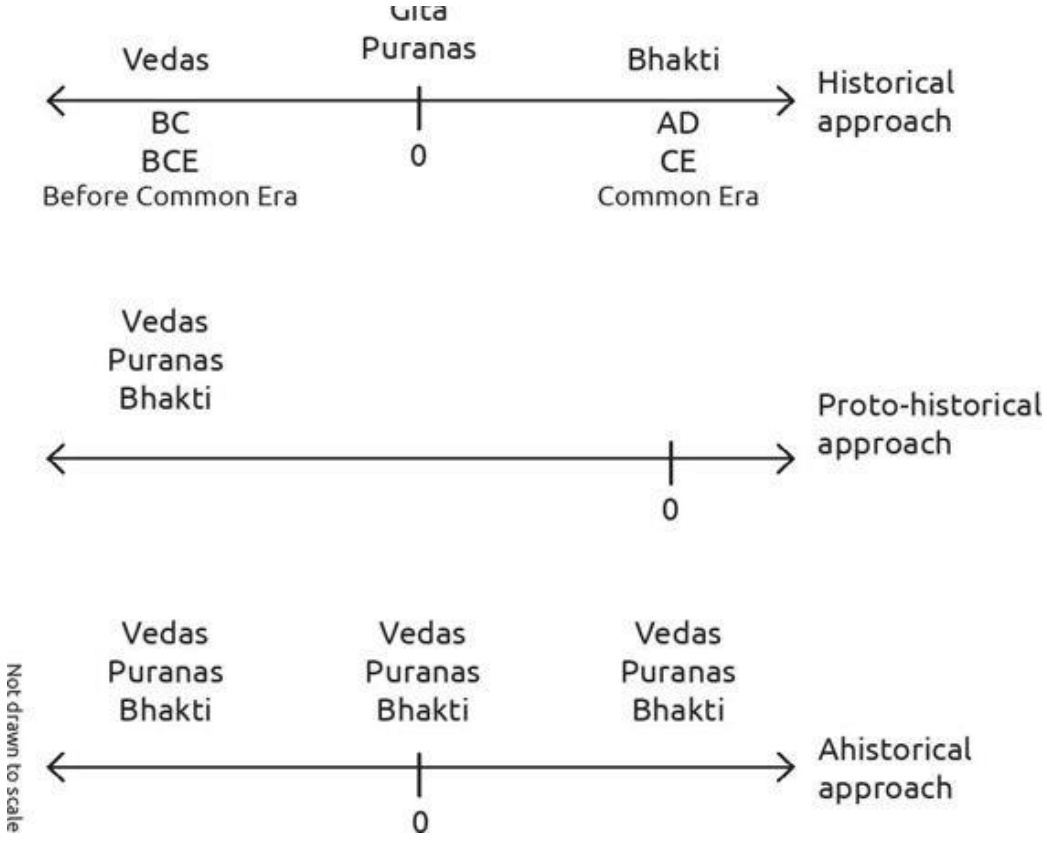
all Hindu rituals, stories and symbols, Vedic or Puranic, as having been created simultaneously over 5,000 years ago. These have become political issues, which influence scholarship.

History seeks to be everyone's truth, but is limited by available facts. More often than not, what is passed off as history is mythology, someone's understanding of truth shaped by memory, feelings and desire, available facts notwithstanding. However, it is never fantasy, or no one's truth.

Historical, Proto-historical and Ahistorical Schools

We must also guard against a masculine view of history based on conflict and triumph alone: natives versus colonizers, polytheism versus monotheism, Hindus versus Buddhists, Christians versus Muslims, Shias versus Sunnis, Shaivites versus Vaishnavites, Protestants versus Catholics, Mughals versus Marathas, democracy

versus monarchy, theists versus atheists, capitalists versus socialists, liberals versus conservatives. This has been popularized by Western academics and their love for the Hegelian dialectic, where thesis creates antithesis until there is resolution and a new thesis. This approach assumes that history has a natural direction and purpose.



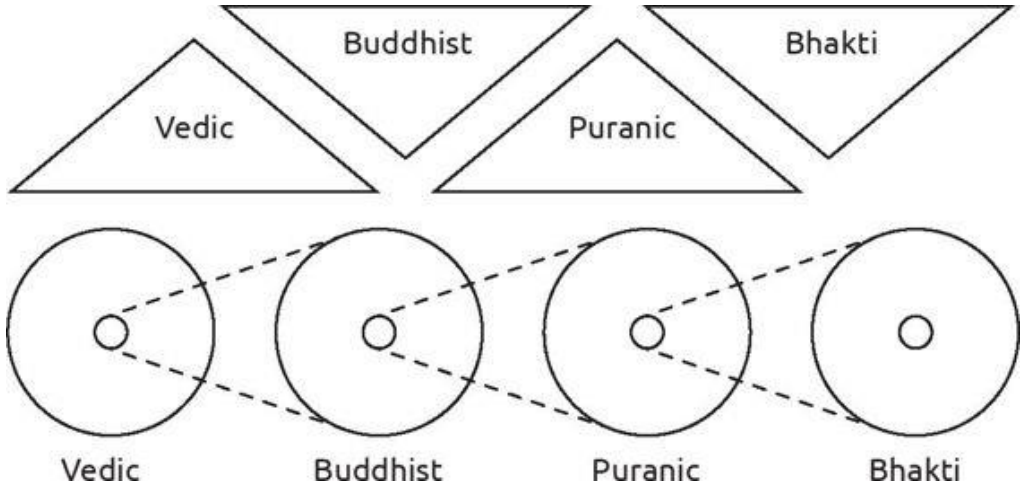
An alternate, feminine view of history looks at every event as the fruit of the past (karma-fala) as well as the seed of future tendencies (karma-bija), without the need to play judge. Thus, we can see the writing of the Gītās as a response to, not an attack on, Buddhist monasticism, and the feminization of Buddhism as a response to, not an appropriation of, the idea of the Bhagavāndess found in Hindu Purāṇas. No idea emerges from a vacuum. Different ideas amplify from time to time. Old ideas coexist with new ones. Contradictory ideas influence each other. Here the world has no beginning, no end, no value, no purpose. All meaning is created by humans, individually and collectively: the boundaries we establish and fight over.

Masculine and Feminine Approaches to History

In most parts of the world, a new idea suppresses and wipes out the old idea, but in India, thanks to the abstract nature of Vedic ideas, new worldviews—be they native ones like Buddhism or Bhakti or foreign ones like Islam and Christianity—simply helped reaffirm the Vedic way in different ways. The same idea manifests as 4,000-year-old Vedic rituals, 2,000-year-old stories, 1,000- year-old temple art and architecture and 500-year-old devotional poetry.

This resilience of the Vedic way led to the Vedas being described in later texts, such as the Brahma-sutras, as being of non-human origin (a-paurusheya). This means Vedic ideas are not artificial: they are a reflection of nature (prakriti) as it is. It is common, however, to glamorize the Vedas by claiming them to be superhuman or supernatural.

Veda essentially refers to a set of hymns, melodies and rituals put together nearly 4,000 years ago that symbolically and metaphorically communicate knowledge (vidya)—observations of seers (rishis), people who saw what others



did not, would not, could not see. The Upanishads speculated on these ideas while Buddhism and other monastic orders challenged the rituals inspired by these ideas. These inform The Gītā. The ideas in The Gītā were illustrated and often elaborated in the Purāṇas, including the great epics, the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata. These were simplified during the Bhakti period and communicated in regional languages. They were expressed in English from the eighteenth century onwards. That is why any study of The Gītā has to

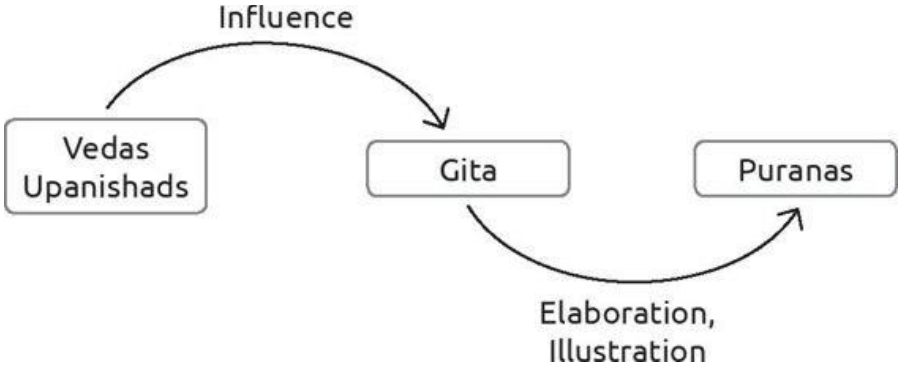
take into consideration Vedic, Upanishadic, Buddhist, Puranic, Bhakti and Orientalist ideas.

Influence, Illustration and Elaboration

Gītās and the Reframing of Hinduism

Two thousand years ago, South Asia was torn between two extremes. On one side were kings who established great empires, such as those of the Nandas, Mauryas, Sungas, Kanvas, Satavahanas, Kushanas and Guptas, which heralded great prosperity but also involved great violence. On the other side were hermits (shramanas) such as the Jains, the Ajivikas and the Buddhists, who spoke of the household as the place of suffering and sought solace in the solitude offered by monasteries (vihāras). More and more people, including kings, were choosing the hermit's way of life over marriage, family vocation and family responsibilities, causing great alarm. Chandragupta Maurya embraced Jainism. His grandson, Ashoka, embraced Buddhism.

For 2,000 years before this, society was dominated by Vedic lore. At the heart of the Veda was the ritual called yagna, which involved exchange, giving in order to get, thus establishing a relationship between the yajamāna, who initiated the ritual and the other—family, friends, strangers, ancestors, Bhagavāns,



nature and cosmos. It was all about the household.

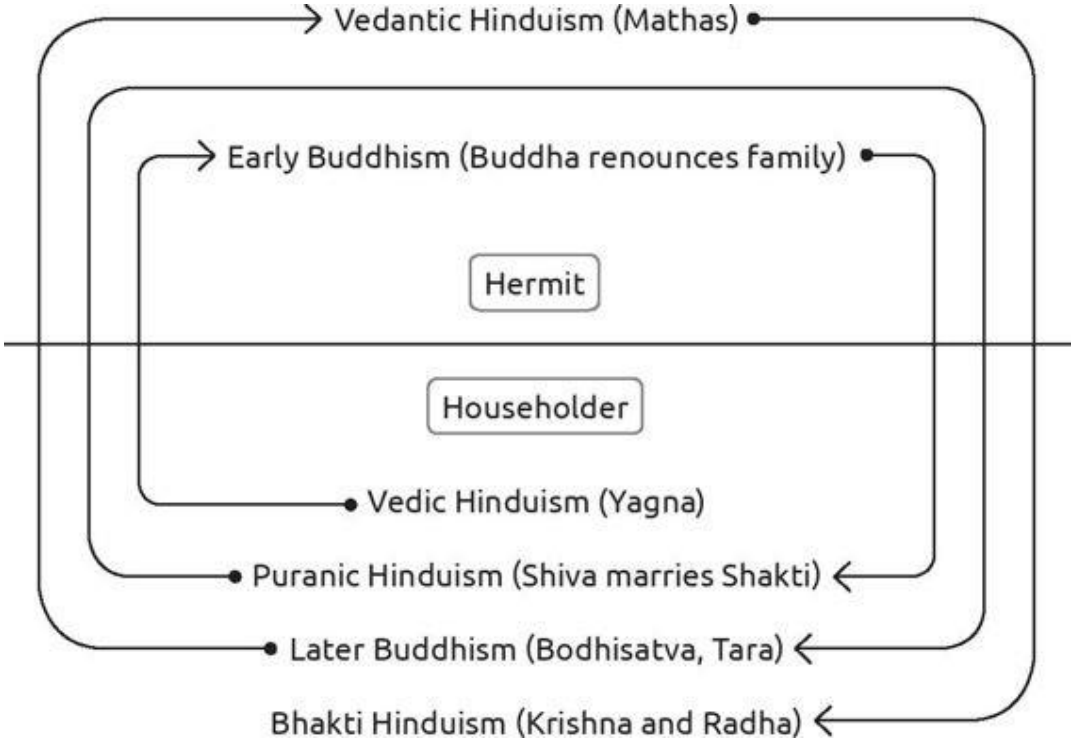
Tension Between Hermit and Householder

There were hermits in these Vedic times too: the rishis, who were married but chose philosophical exploration over material

ambitions; the sanyasis, who had chosen to renounce the household after completing all household duties; and the tapasvis, who chose to be celibate in the pursuit of occult powers (siddhi). The Vedas presented a world where there was no conflict between the householder's way and hermit's way, as in the legendary kingdom of Mithila ruled by Janaka.

Vedic ideas were transmitted via the hymns of the Ṛg Veda, melodies of the Sama Veda, rituals of the Yajur Veda and even the spells of the Atharva Veda. The idea of including the Atharva Veda in the list of Vedas is a much later phenomenon. Still later, the epic Mahābhārata and even the Natya Shastra—that discusses art and aesthetics—came to be seen as the fifth Veda.

Vedic transmission is highly symbolic, with the onus of transmitting the ideas resting on priests (brahmanas, or Brāhmaṇas) and the onus of decoding them resting on the patron (yajamāna). As the centuries passed, as society grew in size and complexity, as economic and political realities shifted, as tribes and clans gave way to villages with multiple communities, which gave rise to kingdoms



and later empires, the transmission began to fail. The transmitters of Vedic lore, the Brāhmaṇas, assumed the role of

decoders. In other words, the librarian became the professor! Consequently, hymns and rituals stopped being seen as symbolic puzzles that when deciphered unravelled the mysteries of the world. Instead, they became magical tools to attract fortune and ward off misfortune.

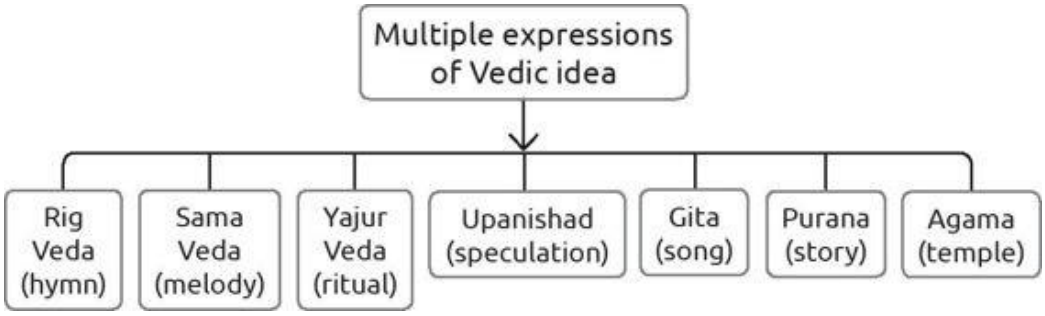
This trend towards materialism over self-enquiry may have contributed to the rise of the shramanas, who were known for their disdain of Brāhmaṇas and Brahmanic rituals. The need for reframing Vedic ideas was felt even within the Vedic fold.

The reframing of Hinduism happened rather organically over a period of another 1,000 years. No authority spearheaded it. Sages began communicating Vedic ideas choosing stories as their vehicle, instead of rituals and hymns. The stories were based on traditional accounts of events, both experienced and imagined. These were 'open source' narratives, with plots and counter-plots gradually turning into pieces of a complex jigsaw. Everyone worked anonymously and attributed their work to one Vyāsa, who was the son of a fisherwoman. He was also credited with reorganizing the lost Vedas. The word 'Vyāsa' means compiler: compiler of Vedic knowledge, as well as compiler of Puranic stories.

Transmission of the Veda

The narratives by 'Vyāsa' were called the Purāṇas, or chronicles, which included the epics RāMāyāṇa and Mahābhārata that spoke of family quarrels over property. They were also called Itihasa. Itihasa, taken literally, means stories from the past. Itihasa, taken symbolically, means stories that will always be true: past, present or future. They reiterated the concept of 'iti', which means 'as things are'—accepting the reality of sex and violence, desires and conflicts in relationships, household and life.

Those who affirmed iti were the astikas. Those who denied iti were the nastikas. Later, as Hinduism turned more theistic, iti denoted faith in Bhagavān, and



so astikas and nastikas would come to mean believers and non-believers.

Unlike monastic orders of Buddhism, which spoke of withdrawal and renunciation, these narratives spoke of liberation despite engaging with society and upholding responsibilities. Household quarrels and property disputes were always resolved using Vedic wisdom presented in the form of conversations. Often, the conversations were turned into Gītās, made lyrical using the anushtup metre, where each verse has four sentences and each sentence has eight

syllables.

The Mahābhārata itself has many Gītās, besides the butcher's song and

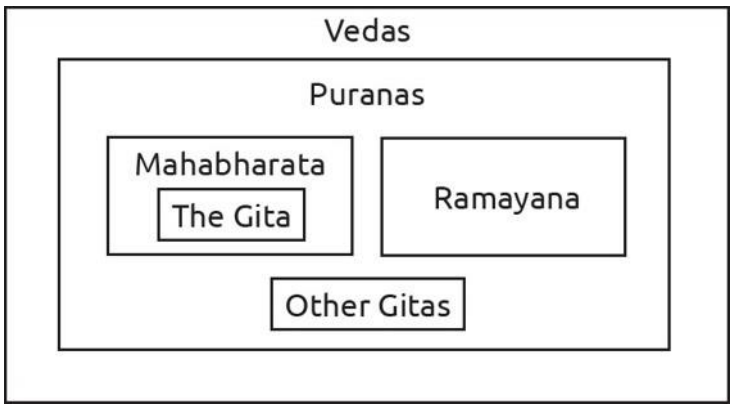
Bhagavān's song. In the Shanti Parva, Book 12 of the Mahābhārata, Bhisma reveals nine Gītās to the Pāṅdavas: the prostitute's song (Pingala Gītā), the priest's song (Sampaka Gītā), the farmer's song (Manki Gītā), the ascetic's song (Bodhya Gītā), the king's song (Vichaknu Gītā), the retired man's song (Harita Gītā), the demon's song (Vritra Gītā), the philosopher's song (Parasara Gītā) and the swan's song (Hansa Gītā). Outside the Mahābhārata, there are the Ashtavakra Gītā, Vasishtha Gītā, Rāma Gītā, Śiva Gītā, Devi Gītā, Ganesha Gītā and many more.

Locating The Gītā in a Sea of Scriptures

The Bhagavad Gītā, of course, remains the most widely read of the Gītās. It is the counsel of a chariot-driver called KṚṢṆA to the chariot-rider and archer, Arjuna, just before the start of a war at Kuru-kśetra between the five Pāṅdava brothers and their hundred Kaurava

cousins. It is so popular that today, when we say Gītā, we mean the Bhagavad Gītā.

In its final form, the Bhagavad Gītā had 700 verses, split into 18 chapters, of which 574 are spoken by KṚṢṆA, 84 by Arjuna, 41 by Sanjaya and 1 by Dhṛtarāṣṭra. There are suggestions that the Bhagavad Gītā originally had 745 verses. It is a conversation, though it does seem like a discourse, which takes



place over ninety minutes while fully armed soldiers on either side wait impatiently to do battle. Whether this event is a time-bound physical objective truth (history) or a timeless psychological subjective truth (mythology) remains a matter of opinion.

Commentaries, Retellings, Translations

Interpretations of The Gītā started appearing nearly five centuries after its final composition. The reason for this gap remains a mystery. The Vedic idea was widely prevalent, but no special attention was given to this particular conversation in the Mahābhārata between KṚṢṆA and Arjuna.

Commentaries on The Gītā start appearing from approximately the time Islam entered India. One of the world's oldest mosques was built on the Malabar coast in the seventh century, and Adi Śaṅkara, who wrote the first elaborate commentary on The Gītā and made it an important scripture for Vedāṅta, was also born in the Malabar coast region in the eighth century. A relationship cannot be denied. Whether this was pure coincidence or the cause for the resurgence of

The Gītā remains a matter of speculation, mired in contemporary politics.

With Islam, India was exposed to Abrahamic mythology: the idea of one formless Bhagavān, one holy book, one set of rules and one way of thinking that included a violent rejection of hierarchy as well as idolatry. Christian and Jewish traders had introduced many of these ideas before, but nothing on the Islamic scale. As many Muslims settled in India, as many kingdoms came to be ruled by Muslims, as many Indian communities converted to Islam, they were bound to influence Hindu thought. However, the extent of Islamic influence provokes fierce debate.

The Gītā readings took place in five waves spread over 1,200 years.

The first wave involved Sanskrit 'commentaries' (bhasyas) by Vedāṅta scholars, the most celebrated of whom were Adi Śaṅkara from Kerala in the eighth century followed by Rāmaanuja from Tamil Nadu in the eleventh century and Madhva Acharya from Karṇataka in the thirteenth century. They were concerned about the nature of Bhagavān, and the relationship of divinity and humanity. Was Bhagavān within or without? Was Bhagavān embodied (sa-guna) or formless (nir-guna)? Their language was highly intellectual. What is significant is that all three commentators were celibate monks, who either did not marry or gave up marriage and established Hindu monastic orders (mathas), suggesting very clearly that Hinduism, once champion of the householder's way, had ended

up mimicking the hermit's way of Buddhism it had previously always mocked. It contributed to the gradual separation of the more intellectual Vedāṅta from the more sensory Tantra, with the former becoming more mainstream and the latter being seen more as the occult.

The second wave involved 'retellings' in regional languages, the earliest of which was in Marathi by Gyaneshwara (thirteenth century), followed by the works of Niranam Madhava Panikkar in

Malayalam (fourteenth century), Peda Tirumalacharya in Telugu (fifteenth century), BalaRāmaa Das in Odiya (fifteenth century), Govind Mishra in Assamese (sixteenth century), Dasopant Digambara and TukaRāma in Marathi (seventeenth century) and many more. The tone in these regional works was extremely emotional, with the poets speaking of Bhagavān in extremely personal and affectionate terms. Gyaneshwara even refers to KṚṢṆA as 'mother', and visualizes him as a cow that comforts the frightened calf, Arjuna, with the milk that is The Gītā. It is through works such as these, usually presented as songs, that the wisdom of The Gītā reached the masses. It is in this phase that the Bhagavad Purāṇa, or simply Bhāgavata, which describes the earlier life of KṚṢṆA as a cowherd, became the dominant text of Hinduism. It is also during this phase that The Gītā started being personified as a Bhagavāndess, and hymns were composed to meditate on her (Gītā Dhyāna) and celebrate her glory (Gītā Mahatmya). Gītā Jayanti, the eleventh day of the waxing moon in the month of Margashisha (December), was identified as the day when KṚṢṆA revealed this wisdom to Arjuna, and the world.

Gyaneshwara

The third wave involved ‘translations’ by Europeans—eighteenth-century European Orientalists such as Charles Wilkins, who was sponsored by the East India Company, and nineteenth-century poets such as Edwin Arnold, who also introduced the Buddha and many things Eastern to Europe. They sought an objective, hence correct, reading of The Gītā, implicitly introducing the suggestion that commentaries and retellings and poetic renditions were mere

interpretations—subjective, contaminated by artistic liberty, hence inferior. The translators were Christian and, like Muslims, immersed in Abrahamic monotheistic mythology, who saw Bhagavān as the primary source of knowledge and humans as sinners who needed to follow the way of Bhagavān. Naturally, they saw The Gītā's Bhagavān as judge, even though such a concept was alien to Hinduism. The Gītā naturally became a directive from Bhagavān, a Hindu Bible! These translations, and the meanings given by Orientalists to Sanskrit words, with assumptions rooted in Abrahamic mythology, continue to be subscribed to and have a profound impact on the understanding of The Gītā in modern times.

The fourth wave involved 're-translations' by Indian nationalists. The Indian National Movement gained momentum in the early part of the twentieth century, and there was an increased urgency to bind the diverse peoples of the Indian subcontinent into a single narrative. The Gītā seemed like a good book to do so. But different leaders saw it differently. Sri Aurobindo found in The Gītā mystical ideas of an ancient civilization, while B.R. Ambedkar pointed out that The Gītā seemed to justify the draconian caste system. Bal Gaṅgādhar Tilak found the rationale for righteous violence in it, while Mahātmā Gandhi found inspiration for the path of non-violence. This was the period that the world was introduced to the words of the Buddha that were compared with the words of KṚṢṆA. Eventually, Arjuna's dilemma was radically re-articulated: it became less about 'how can I kill family?' and more about 'how can I kill?'

The fifth wave involved 'reframing' following the end of the two World Wars that replaced colonial empires with republics and democratic nation states. The world, traumatized by violence, was confused as to how to interpret The Gītā. J. Robert Oppenheimer infamously equated the nuclear bomb with KṚṢṆA's cosmic form. Aldous Huxley saw The Gītā as part of the perennial philosophy that bound all humanity. It became the definitive holy book of the Hindus that spoke of peace. Spiritual gurus started projecting The Gītā as a directive from Bhagavān with a well-defined goal of liberation (moksha) and turned Hinduism into a 'religion'. Management gurus

used The Gītā to explain leadership, ethics, governance and the art of winning. By the 1980s, before the

Internet explosion, there were an estimated 3,000 translations of The Gītā in almost fifty languages, and nearly a thousand in English.

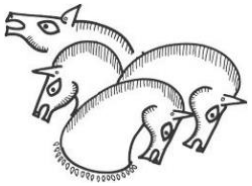
Some American academicians, in recent times, have challenged the notion that The Gītā has anything to do with peace. They tend to project Hinduism as the outcome of an oppressive violent force called Brāhmaṇaism that sought to wipe out Buddhist pacifism and propagate a hierarchical system that promoted patriarchy and untouchability. The Gītā then becomes a complex justification of violence. Any attempt to challenge this view is dismissed as religious fundamentalism or Hindu nationalism. Such a naïve, or perhaps deliberate, force-fitting of Hinduism into the conflict-based masculine historical template, long favoured in the West, is increasingly being condemned as Hindu-phobia, especially by the Hindu diaspora. Increasingly, historians are drawing attention to the deep prejudice and cultural context of many South Asian scholars, as well as nationalists, that influence the way they make sense of facts.

To eyes that can see, each of these waves is a response to a historical context, be it the amplification of Hindu theism in the Buddhist and Islamic periods or the transformation of India into a British colony or the rise of the national movement or the end of empires, the rise of secular democracies with atheistic ideologies or an increasingly digitized global village having an identity crisis, where everyone seems to be tired of violence but no one seems to be able to give it up.

You and I live in unique times. We have access to the history of The Gītā, its creation and its transformation over time. We have a better understanding of geography, of history, of different mythologies and philosophies from around the world, with which we can compare and contrast ideas of The Gītā. We have access to research on animal, human and developmental psychology. We are also aware that any study of The Gītā eventually becomes a study of how humans see the world, how Indians saw the world, how the West

wants to see India, how India wants to see India and how we want to see The Gītā.

Rather than seeking a singular authentic message, you and I must appreciate the plurality of ideas that have emerged over the centuries and seek out what binds them, and what separates them. In the various translations, commentaries and retellings, we do find a common tendency to appreciate the relationship between the self (Arjuna) and the other; those who stand on our side (Pāṅdavas); those who stand on the other (Kauravas); the one who stands on everybody's side (KṚṢṆA); and of course, property (Kuru- kśetra). Our relationship with the other, be it a thing or an organism, and the other's relationship with us, is what determines our humanity. And this is a timeless (sanatana) truth (satya), a discovery of our ancestors, which we will explore in *My Gītā.*



My Gītā

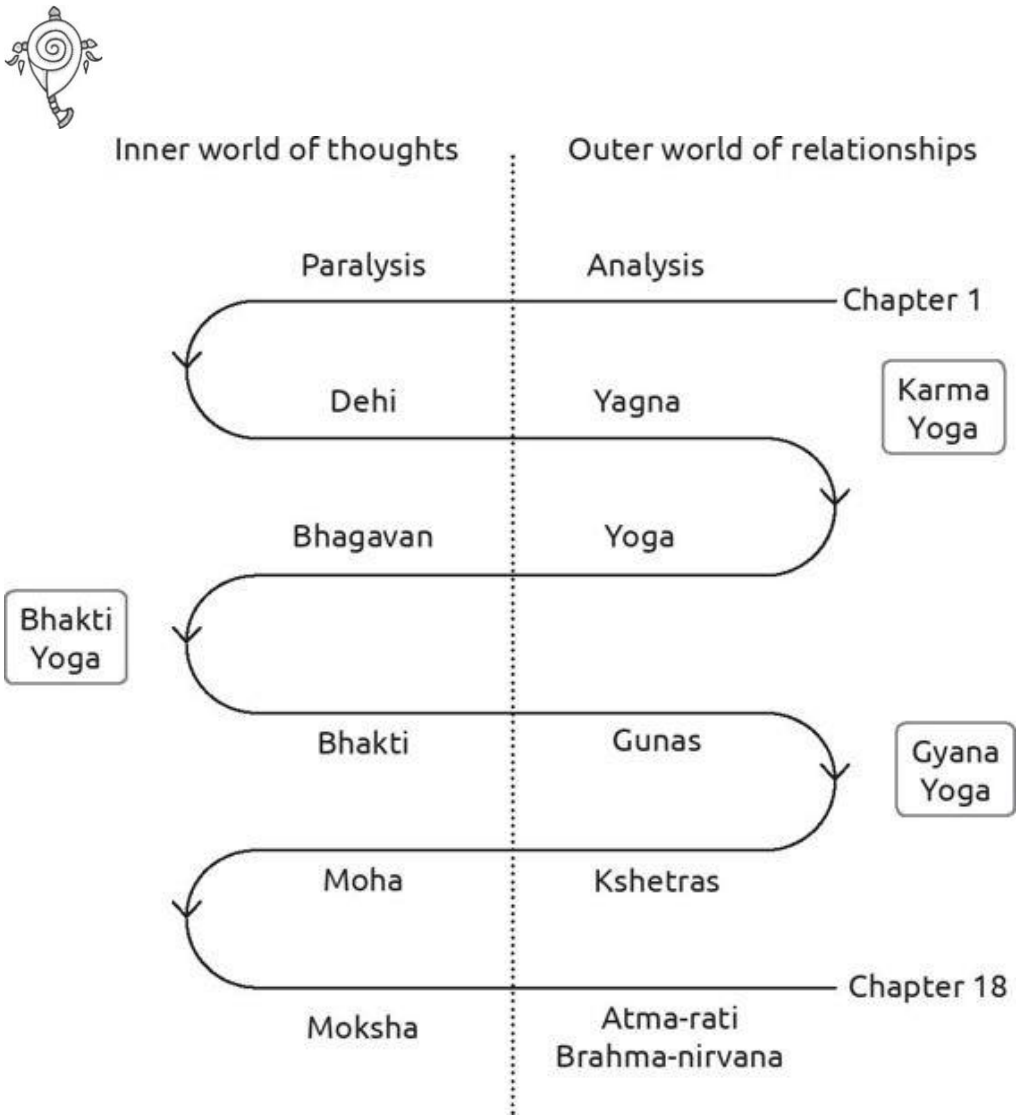
Vishwa-rupa

In the following chapters, you and I will explore eighteen themes of The Gītā. We will continuously journey between the outer world of relationships and the

inner world of thoughts and emotions. We will begin by appreciating how we look at the world and ourselves (darśan). Then we will understand the architecture of the world we inhabit, composed of the tangible and the intangible, both within and around us (ātmā, deha, dehi, karma). After that, we will see how humans can socially connect (dharma, yagna, yoga). Then we will appreciate the idea of Bhagavān (deva, Bhagavān, brahmana, avatara), located in all of us, that helps us cope with our fears that disconnect us from society. Lack of faith in the divine within makes us seek solace outside, in property (kśetra, Māyā). Because of this, a tug-of-war ensues between the inside and the outside. As long as we cling (moha), we are trapped. As soon as we let go, we are liberated (moksha). We become independent and content in our own company

(ātmā-rati) yet generous and dependable for the other (brahma-nirvana).

The sequence of themes in ***My Gītā*** is slightly different from the sequence of themes in The Gītā as some concepts have been elaborated to facilitate understanding.



The Architecture of My Gītā

Themes in The Gita	Chapter	Themes in *My Gita*
Arjuna's despair	1	Observation (darshan)
Summary of analysis (sankhya)	2	Rebirth (atma)
Informed action (karma)	3	Mortal Body (deha)
Appreciating exchange (gyana)	4	Body's immortal resident (dehi)
Detached action (sanyasa)	5	Cause and consequence (karma)
Inner journey (dhyana)	6	Appropriate conduct (dharma)
Inner potential (vi-gyana)	7	Exchange (yagna)
Rebirth or liberation (askhara)	8	Introspection (yoga)
Special secret (raja-guhya)	9	Trust (deva–asura)
Description of divinity (vibhuti)	10	Potential (bhagavan)
Sight of divinity (vishwa-rupa)	11	Expanding the mind (brahmana)
Form or formless (bhakti)	12	Contracting the mind (avatar)
Proprietorship (kshetra)	13	Tendencies of matter (guna)
Tendencies of matter (guna)	14	Proprietorship (kshetra)
Potential (purushottam)	15	Measurement (maya)
Believers (deva-asura)	16	Attachment (moha)
Diversity of devotion (shraddha)	17	Liberation (moksha)
Summary of solution (moksha)	18	Union (brahma-nirvana)

1.
You and I do not have to judge

Hindu mythology does not have the concept of Judgement Day (or qayamat in Arabic). The Bhagavān of Hinduism is no judge. Hence, KṚṢṆA gives no commandments in The Gītā. He simply explains the

architecture of the world. As long as we judge, we cannot see the world for what it is; we are simply spellbound by the boundaries that we build separating those whom we consider family from those whom we consider enemy, as we realize in Chapter 1 of The Gītā. This chapter introduces the concept of **darśan**, or observing, that is implicit in the Vedas and The Gītā and the Mahābhārata, but becomes an explicit ritual in temples of Puranic Hinduism where devotees are invited to gaze upon the enshrined deity, and the deity looks back at them, without a blink.

The Gītā begins with how Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Duryodhana and Arjuna view the same battlefield. Below is what Dhṛtarāṣṭrasays in the very first verse of The Gītā. It is the only verse he speaks:

Sanjaya, tell me what is going on between my sons and Pāṅdu's sons, as they gather in Kuru- kśetra, where they have to do what they are supposed to do?—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 1, Verse 1 (paraphrased).*

Dhṛtarāṣṭrais the head of the Kuru family, whose two branches are about to clash on the battlefield. Naturally, he is curious about what is going on there. He is also concerned whether the right thing is being done there, for he refers to Kuru- kśetra as dharma- kśetra. However, he refers only to his sons, the Kauravas, as mine (mama) and his nephews simply as the Pāṅdavas, the sons of Pāṅdu, not as 'my brother's sons'. Thus, he expresses his exclusion of the Pāṅdavas from his heart: he sees them not as family but as outsiders, intruders, even enemies. He does not realize that this exclusion is the root of the adharma that is the undoing of the Kuru clan. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's blindness is not so much the absence of sight as the absence of empathy.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's blindness extends to his eldest son, Duryodhana, whose conduct on the battlefield is then described by the royal charioteer Sanjaya.

King, your son is not surprised that the enemy is well-prepared; after all, their commander, Dhristadhyumna, is also the student of his tutor, Droṇa. He declares that the Pāṅdavas may have the mighty Bhima leading a limited army, but he has the veteran and the invincible Bhisma on his side leading his limitless army. Having said so, he orders his soldiers to guard Bhisma at all costs.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 1, verses 2 to 11 (paraphrased).*

Duryodhana's words as described by Sanjaya reveal irritation, insecurity and aGītātion, despite the fact that he has eleven armies, and the Pāṅdavas only seven.

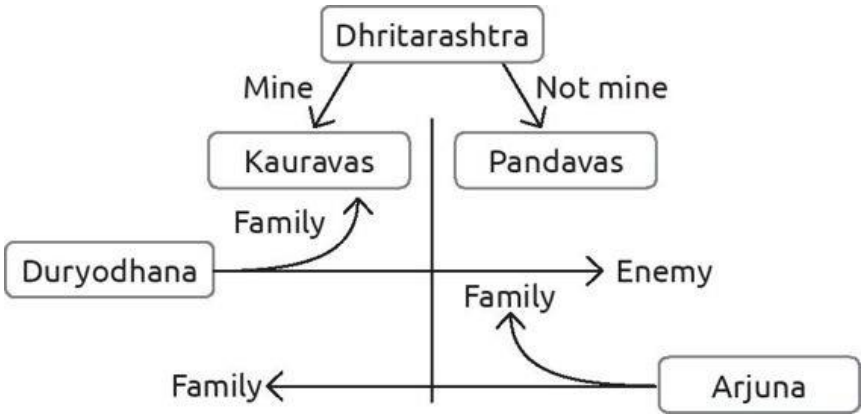
Sanjaya

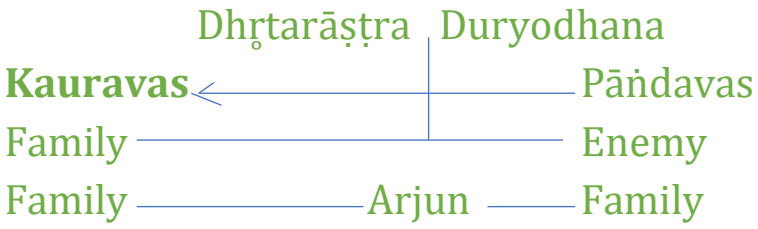
Sanjaya then proceeds to describe Arjuna's entry into the battlefield. Arjuna looks confident, bow in hand, on his chariot drawn by four white horses, with the image of Hanuman, the mighty monkey Bhagavān, on the flag fluttering above. He asks his charioteer, KṚṢṆA, to take him to the centre of the battleground in the space between the two armies. There, in no man's land, the enormity of the unfolding tragedy dawns upon him: on either side are family and friends. Elders, teachers, uncles, nephews, sons-in-law, fathers-in-law. Before him are those he should be protecting, and those who should be protecting him. Instead, they are planning to kill him, and he them. Why? For a piece of land! How can that be right, or good? What impact would it have on civilization?

KṚṢṆA, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons are family. How can we slaughter them; they whose greed blinds them to the horror of the situation? If we kill family over property, why will women bother with fidelity, why will communities respect boundaries? All rituals will be abandoned, and all ancestors will be forgotten. Those who unravel the fabric of family will surely sink into hell. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 1, verses 37 to 45 (paraphrased).*

This response, full of fear and confusion, is very different from the views of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana. The Kaurava father and son have clearly drawn boundaries dividing those they consider their own and those they consider as outsiders, intruders, even enemies. Arjuna's boundaries, however, wobble: how can family be enemy?

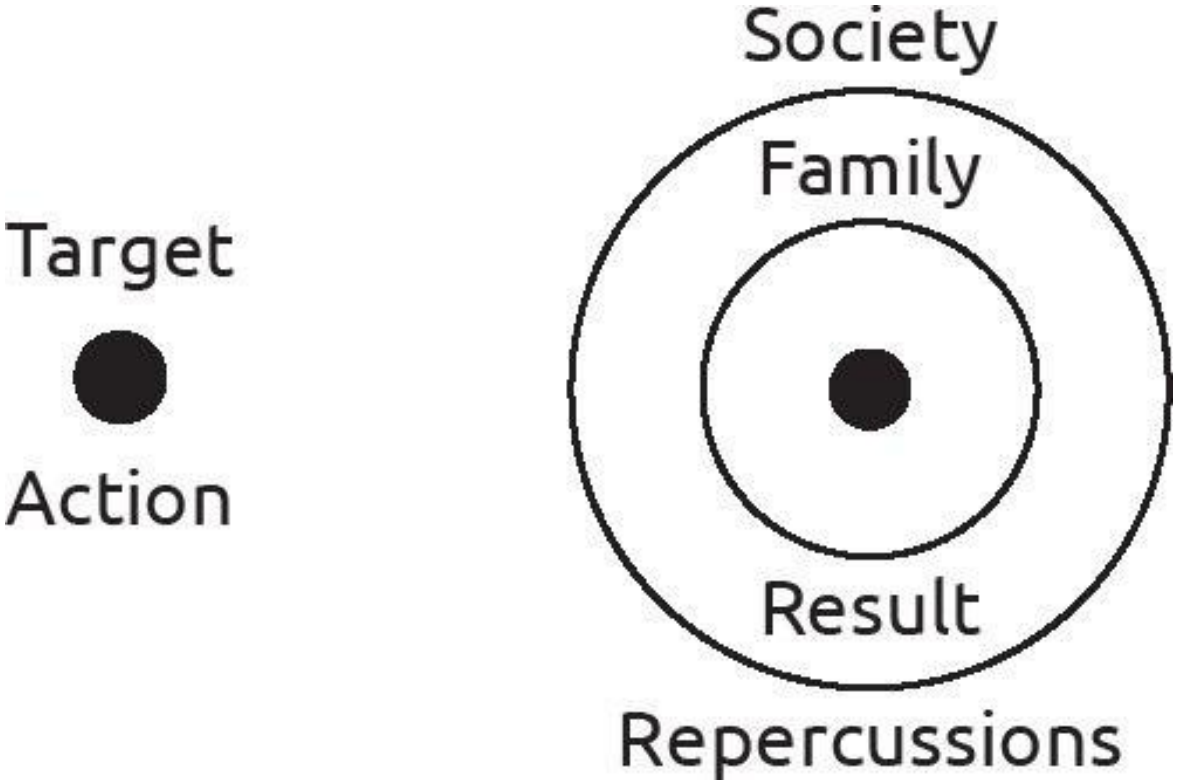
The Mahābhārata describes Arjuna as a highly focussed archer, who could shoot his arrow into the eye of a flying bird without being distracted by the clouds above, or the trees below. Yet, at Kuru-kśetra, Arjuna looks beyond the target and 'sees' family and friends. He questions the morality of his wanting to kill them, and the consequences of such violence on society as a whole. It is not the violence that bothers him; he has killed before. What bothers him is violence against family, those he is meant to protect.





Observing Kuru- kśetra

Here is the very reverse of the psychological blindness displayed by Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana: Arjuna's vision is expanding, focus is giving way to perspective, attention (dhayana) to awareness (dhāraṇā) as his gaze finally rejects the boundary separating the self from the other, and action from responsibility. This is darśan!

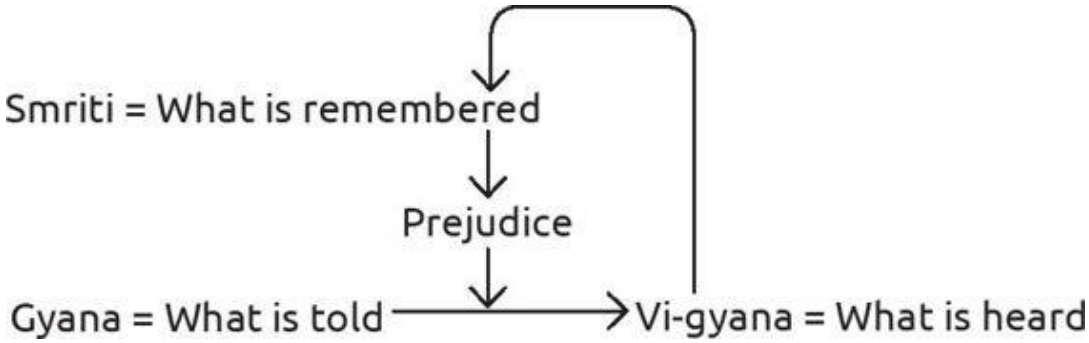


Focus and Perspective

In darśan, there is no judgement because there are no boundaries, no rules, no separation of right and wrong, mine and not mine.

Dhṛtarāṣṭrais unable to do darśan because of memories (smriti); he bears a deep grudge. He was born blind, yet it was he who was never seen. Not by his uncle, **Bhisma, who decided that Dhṛtarāṣṭra's younger brother, Pāṅdu, should be made king instead of him**. Not by his wife, Gāṅdhārī, who decided to share his blindness by wearing a blindfold, rather than compensate for it. Not by his beloved son, Duryodhana, who preferred the advice of his maternal uncle, Shakuni, to his own. Not by his advisor, Vidura, who always praised Pāṅdu's five sons, but never his hundred. Unseen by all, he is simply paying the blindness forward.

Arjuna also has many reasons not to do darśan: the Kauravas tried their best to kill him and his brothers when they were children; they humiliated him and his brothers repeatedly in a gambling hall; they dragged the Pāṅdavas' common wife, Draupadi, by the hair and attempted to disrobe her in public; they refused to return Indra-prastha, the Pāṅdava lands, even though the Pāṅdavas had kept their side of their agreement and spent thirteen years in exile; the Kauravas even refused offers of compromise for the sake of peace. Yet, Arjuna finds it hard to respond to the Kauravas' blindness with blindness.



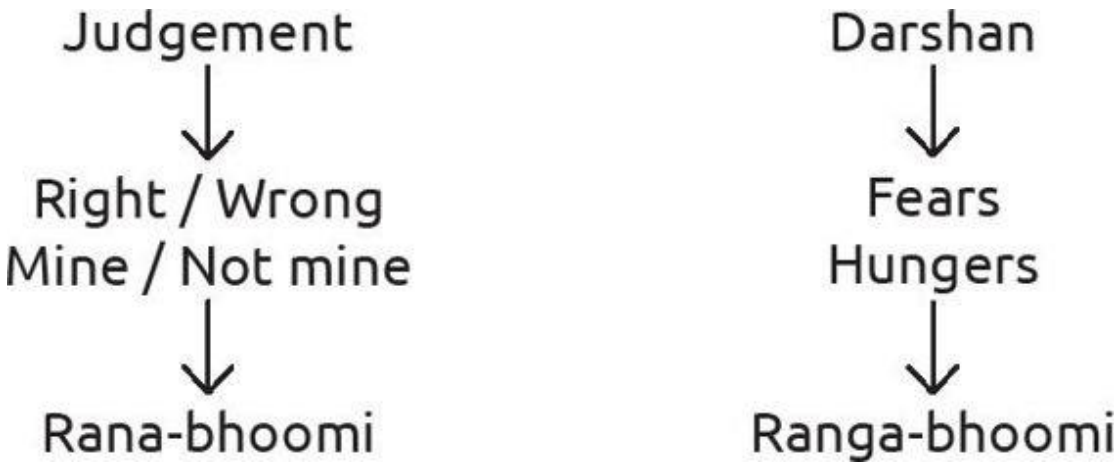
Memories Distort Observation

In an attempt to goad Arjuna into action, KṚṢṆA reminds him of the sufferings of his brothers and his wife and of his duties as a warrior, a brother and a husband. KṚṢṆA even questions Arjuna's manliness (Chapter 2, Verse 3) when he mocks his action as those of a non-man (kliba). He speaks of the glory of paradise that awaits him if he dies, and the satisfaction of victory that awaits him if he lives. But none of these have any impact on Arjuna. **He refuses to let memories strip him of empathy**. He does **darśan** and that **makes him a worthy recipient of The Gītā**.

Long before the war, when negotiations for peace had broken down, KṚṢṆA had revealed his VIRĀTA SVARUPA (cosmic form) — the same form he shows Arjuna during the course of his discourse — to both Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana, perhaps to impress upon father and son that his words needed to be taken seriously. But Dhritarashtra, granted momentary sight, had simply declared his helplessness before such awesomeness and shrunk back into blindness, while Duryodhana had seen it as a magician's trick. Both father and son refused to see what was shown. They clung to the view

that they were the victims. Thus, showing does not guarantee seeing. Telling does not guarantee hearing. Gyana is not vi-gyana.

In judgement, the world is divided: good and bad, innocent and guilty, polluted and pure, oppressor and oppressed, privileged and unprivileged, powerful and powerless. In darśan, one sees a fluid world of cause and consequence, where there are no divisions, boundaries, hierarchies or rules.



Raṇa-bhūmī and Ranga-bhūmī

A world created based on judgement evokes rage. Life becomes a battleground (raṇa-bhūmī) like Kuru- kśetra, where both sides feel like victims, where everyone wants to win at all costs, where someone will always lose. A world created by observation evokes insight, hence affection, for we see the hunger and fear of all beings. Life becomes a performance on a stage (raṅga- bhūmī) aimed to nourish and comfort the other, while deriving nourishment and comfort from their delight. KṚṢṆA's performance (līlā) leads to him being worshipped as Raṅganātha, lord of the stage. He never judges, so he sees no one as a victim. This is how he begins The Gītā:

Arjuna, you grieve for those whom you should not feel sorry for, and you argue as if you are a man of wisdom. But the wise grieve for no one: neither the living, nor the dead. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 11 (paraphrased).*

Do you see me as hero, villain or victim? If yes, then you are not doing darśan. If you can empathize with the fears that make people

heroes, villains and victims, then you are doing darśan. For then you look beyond the boundaries that separate you from the rest.

2.
You and I have been here before

Our **body is mortal** and so it seeks security and creates boundaries. But within this body is the **immortal ātmā** that does not seek security and so, does not care for boundaries. Wrapped in mortal flesh, it experiences life and death, again and again. By introducing the idea of immortality and rebirth in Chapter 2 of The Gītā, KṚṢṆA changes the scope of the discussion, for without death serving as a boundary, there is no fear, no yearning for food or meaning, nowhere to come from, or go to, for the end is no longer the end and the beginning is no longer the beginning. Rather than change the world that defies control, rather than seek Vālīdation from things temporary, we engage, observe, discover and enjoy.

Arjuna, the wise know that you and I and the rest existed before this event and will continue to exist after this event. The resident of this body experiences its childhood, youth and old age before moving on to the next. This body gets attached to the world around it, and so fears death. But the wise, aware of the inner resident's immortality, aware that the flesh goes through cycles of birth and death, do not fear change, or death. They know that what matters is the immortal, not the mortal.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, verses 12 to 16 (paraphrased).*

With these words KṚṢṆA simply renders death irrelevant. He transforms the battlefield into one of the infinite experiences of the immortal resident (dehi) of the mortal body (deha). Later, he identifies dehi as ātmā, puruśa, brahmana and kśetragna. It inhabits various bodies, again and again, lifetime after lifetime. This means that this is not the first time we have experienced the world, and it will not be the last. We have been here before and will return again. Our birth is a rebirth. Our death is a re-death.

Arjuna, you wear fresh clothes at the time of birth and discard them at the time of death. You are not these clothes. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 22 (paraphrased).*

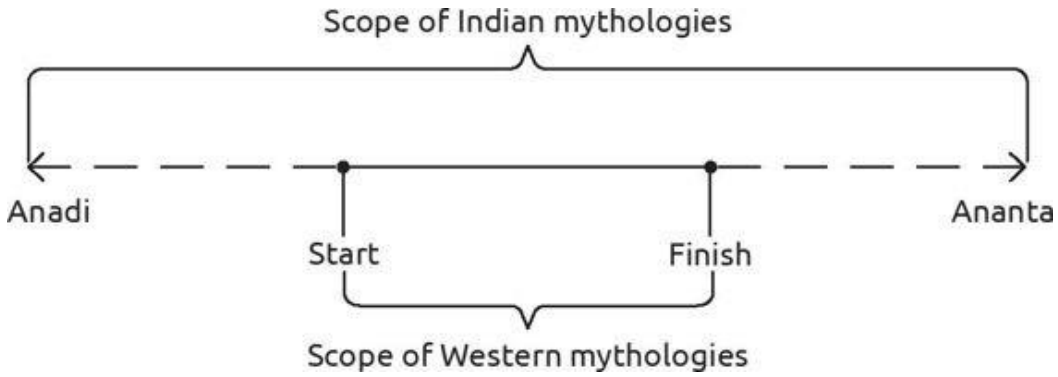
In Chapter 4, KṚṢṆA declares he has transmitted this knowledge before, to the sun or Vaivasvata (the first celestial being), then to Manu (the first man), and then to Ikśvāku (the first king), and that this knowledge is often forgotten.

KṚṢṆA, Vaivasvata lived long ago. You live now. How could you have taught him? — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, Verse 4 (paraphrased).*

Arjuna is naturally startled. KṚṢṆA responds by revealing that he has lived before, as has Arjuna; he remembers it, but Arjuna does not, for Arjuna is trapped in the outer world of tangible objects and has no insight into the inner world of intangible thoughts.

Arjuna, at the dawn of Brahma's day, all forms burst forth. At dusk, they withdraw into formlessness. The children of Brahma stay entrapped in the wheel of rebirths as their mind is drawn by their senses. But those who fix their minds on me break free from this wheel of rebirths, of fluctuating between form and formlessness. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 8, verses 16 to 26 (paraphrased).*

The idea of **rebirth forms the cornerstone of Hindu thought**. It is also the mainstay of Buddhist and Jain philosophies. But there are differences. Buddhists do not believe in the existence of the immortal resident (ātmā), and Jains do not believe in the concept of Bhagavān (param-ātmā), but they both agree on the concept of rebirth (punar-janma). In Jainism and Buddhism, the world of rebirths is called samsara, propelled by action (karma) and memories of past actions (saṁskāra). These are sometimes referred to as dharma mythologies, distinguishing them from Abrahamic or non-dharma mythologies such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam that believe in only one life, and an afterlife in heaven or hell. Science endorses only one life, as the afterlife or rebirth defies scientific measurement.



Dharma and Non-dharma Mythologies

The idea of rebirth can be seen at metaphysical, social and psychological levels. Together they change our view of life.

At a metaphysical level, rebirth helps us explain the inexplicable, and replace conflict with acceptance and peace. Why are some people born into rich families and some into poor families, some to loving parents and some to cruel parents, some with talent and some without? Who is to be blamed?

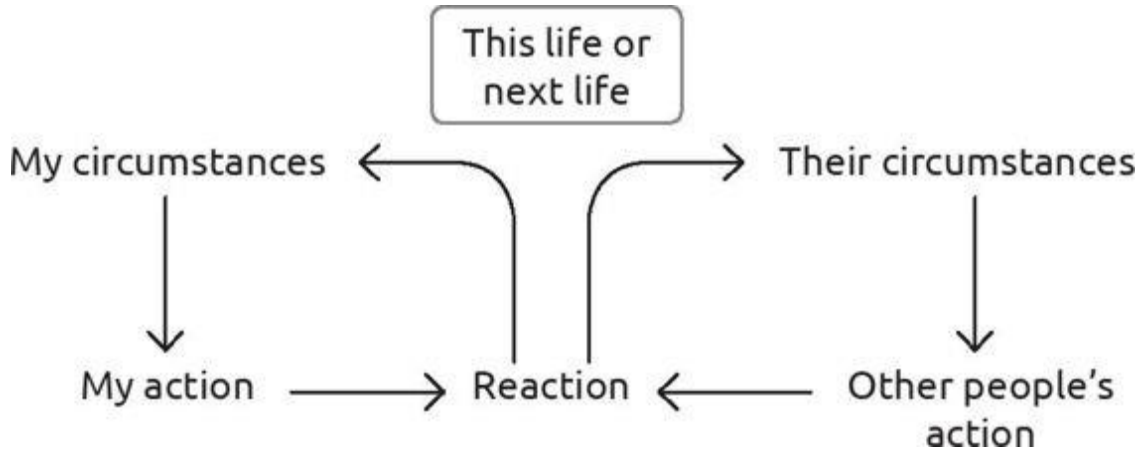
In Abrahamic mythology, the explanation of everything is Bhagavān's will. Our sufferings are the result of disobeying Bhagavān's will and law, having fallen under the spell of the Devil. All will be well if we repent of our sins, accept Bhagavān's love and demonstrate it by following His law. This assumption fuels guilt.

In Greek mythology, wealth and power are seen as having been cornered by the privileged few, and heroes have to fight these oppressors, bring justice and offer equal opportunities to all. This assumption fuels rage.

Science offers no explanation, as science is not about 'why', but about 'how'. For the why, the social sciences invariably turn to Greek mythology with its oppressor-oppression framework that resurrected after the European Renaissance, 600 years ago. Or it creates a new Bhagavān: the people.

In Hindu mythology, there is no one but ourselves to blame for our problems: neither Bhagavān nor any oppressors. The **idea of rebirth aims to evoke acceptance of the present, and**

responsibility for the future. Our immortal soul is tossed from one life to another as long as our mind refuses to do darśan. This is made most explicit in the story of Karṇa in the Mahābhārata.



My Action, My Circumstance

Karṇa is a foundling brought up by a charioteer, who rises to be a king through sheer talent and effort and discovers much later in life that he is of royal blood, abandoned at birth by his mother Kuṅtī, who went on to marry King Pāṅdu. Kuṅtī's children are none other than the Pāṅdavas, who constantly mock his lowly status and who are the enemies of his benefactor and best friend, Duryodhana. Before the war, Karṇa has the option to switch to the opposite side, where as the eldest of the Pāṅdavas, he would become the rightful heir to Pāṅdu and the first of Draupadi's husbands. But Karṇa chooses to stay loyal to the Kauravas. During the war at Kuru-kśetra, everyone and everything turns against him. First, Bhisma does not let him fight as long as he is alive. Then Droṇa makes him use his best weapons prematurely. Arjuna's celestial father, the rain Bhagavān Indra, tricks him into giving up his invulnerable armour, taking advantage of his charitable nature. To mock the Pāṅdavas, Duryodhana gets their uncle, Śalya, to serve as Karṇa's charioteer, but that turns out to be a terrible decision as Śalya spends all his time praising Arjuna and demotivating Karṇa. When the wheel of Karṇa's chariot gets stuck in the ground, Śalya refuses to pull it out, claiming he is a king, not a charioteer. The mantra taught by Paraśurāma to release wheels stuck in the ground does not work. So Karṇa throws down his bow and tries to pull the wheel out himself, and in that unarmed, helpless moment,

goaded by KṚṢṆA, Arjuna strikes him dead. Karṇa, who sought all his life to be an archer and a king, thus dies as a charioteer, the profession of his foster father that he shunned.

Karṇa's story is a tragic one. Though technically an insider, circumstances make him an outsider, who is never ever allowed into the family. He is used and exploited by all, not just the Kauravas, but also his birth mother, Kuṅtī, who comes to him only at the brink of war and tries to take advantage of his charitable nature. Even KṚṢṆA tries to tempt him away from his friend and benefactor, Duryodhana. **Despite his charity, his integrity and his loyalty, he suffers all his life**. We see him as a victim, but KṚṢṆA does not. For KṚṢṆA knows his previous lives.

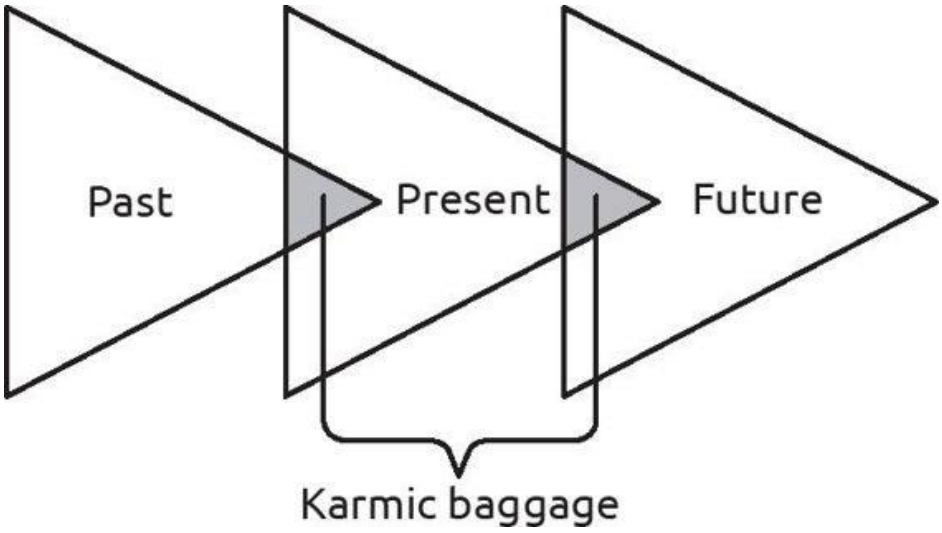
In one story, Karṇa was an asura blessed with a thousand armours called **Sahasrakavacha**. To destroy each armour, a warrior had to acquire special powers by meditating for a thousand years. Even with these powers, destroying the armour would need a thousand years. So Nara and Nārāyaṇa, twin sages, avatars of Viṣṇū, attacked this asura simultaneously—while one meditated, the other fought, taking turns to acquire the power and to destroy the armour. By the time they had destroyed all but one of the thousand armours, the world came to an end. But the world was reborn; the asura was reborn as Karṇa, Nara as Arjuna and Nārāyaṇa as KṚṢṆA. We are told that only KṚṢṆA knows the full story and so, while Karṇa is a victim if we know only his present story, he becomes a villain if we know another backstory.

In another story, when Viṣṇū descended on earth as Rāma, he killed Vālī, the son of Indra, and sided with Sugriva, the son of Surya. So when Viṣṇū descended as KṚṢṆA, he was obliged to restore the balance in the cosmos by killing Karṇa, son of Surya, and siding with Arjuna, son of Indra. Here, one story is one half of another story, and Karṇa's misfortune neutralizes his fortune in another life. Free of any obligations or expectations, he would thus be liberated from the wheel of rebirths. So his killing, which we feel is a sad incident, becomes a wonderful event.

In a third story, when Viṣṇū descended as Paraśurāma, he trained Bhisma, Droṇa and Karṇa, who ended up siding with the Kauravas and upholding adharma. Since he could not kill his own students, Viṣṇū again descended as KṚṢṆA, and supported the Pāṅdavas, who fought and killed the Kauravas and their commanders. Here KṚṢṆA is reborn to correct the errors of a previous life, one of them being Karṇa.

In the Purāṇas, stories of past lives are continuously used to counter assumptions of another story. It reminds us that our story is part of a grand jigsaw puzzle. We are part of a larger narrative. Stories of the past impact stories of the present that impact stories of the future. We may not know these stories, but we have played roles in them. We must not assume that the story we encounter, experience or remember is the only story in the world. Our lives are the outcomes of roles performed in other stories. Even if we don't remember those stories or those roles, we cannot escape their consequences.

'Arjuna, when I take form, particles of myself form the various beings in this world and I draw the mind and the senses to me. It is I who experience the world through the senses. When I lose form, I carry memories of these experiences to the next form, just as the breeze carries fragrances. The wise see me enjoying and transporting myself so. The unwise don't.'—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 15, verses 7 to 10 (paraphrased).*



Impact of Past on Present and Present on Future

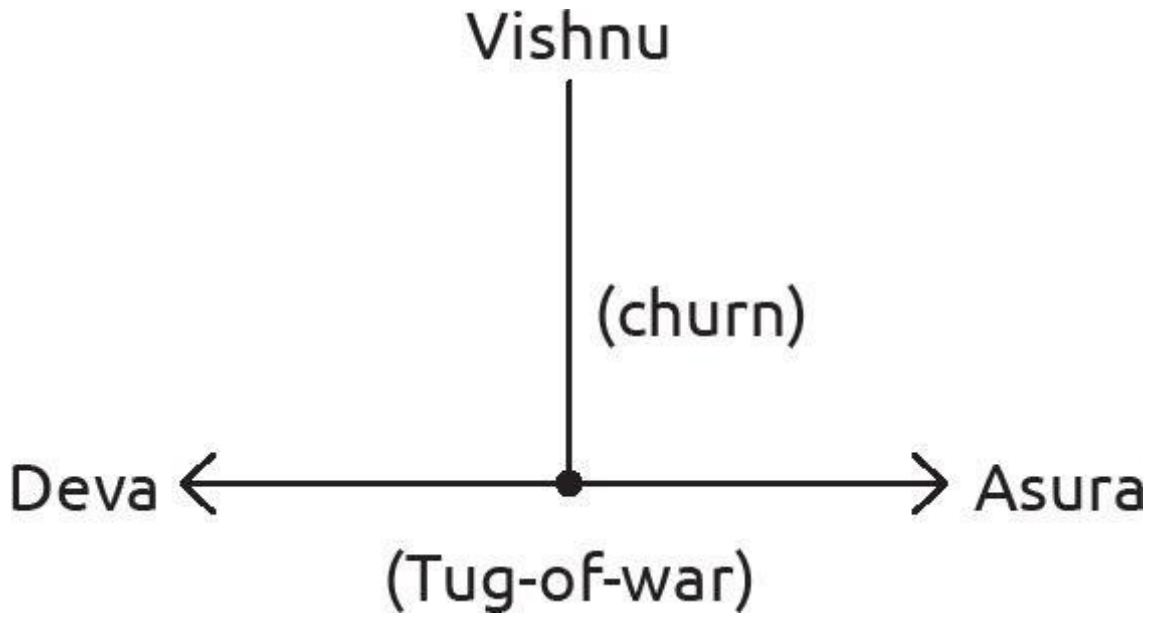
At a social level, the idea of rebirth expands the canvas of our lives and brings perspective. It reminds us that the world existed before us and the world will exist after us. Like us, many people have sought to change the world and make it better, even perfect, but while changes do take place technologically, no real change takes place psychologically — **people are still jealous and angry and ambitious and greedy and heartbroken**. **While the West valorizes social transformation**, The **Gītā is focussed on individual psychological expansion**.

The world into which we are born is imagined as a stage full of actors but with no script, or director. Everyone assumes they are the hero, but discover they are not the protagonists of the ongoing play. We are forced to play certain roles and speak certain dialogues. But we revolt. We want our own script to be performed and our own dialogues to be heard. So we negotiate with fellow actors. Some succeed in getting heard with some people, others fail with most people, no one succeeds with everybody. We cling to our scripts, submit to other people's scripts, speak dialogues we do not want to, only to stay relevant and connected to the larger narrative, or at least to a subplot. Heroes emerge. Villains emerge. Heroes of one plot turn out to be villains of other plots. Eventually, all leave the stage but the play continues. Who knows what is actually going on? Viṣṇū, the ranga-nātha? All we can decipher are the patterns, as does he.

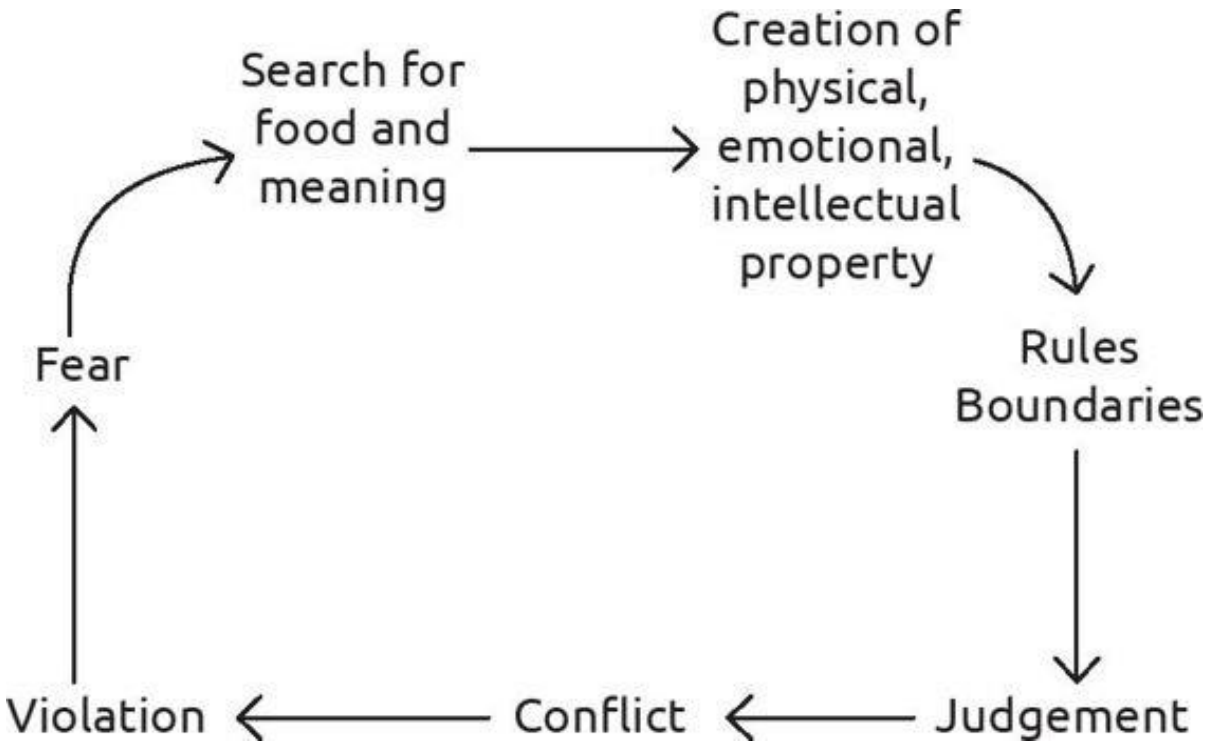
In the Purāṇas, Viṣṇū sees the devas and asuras in eternal combat: the devas feel they are entitled, and the asuras feel they have been tricked; the devas do not share, and the asuras always scare. The force of the devas and the counterforce of the asuras, their alternating victories and defeats, keep the world moving. Viṣṇū sleeps and awakens, and smiles, turning the unproductive fight into a productive churn whenever he can, as Brahma and his sons struggle continuously to control life, rather than accept and enjoy it, despite Viṣṇū's numerous interventions.

In the RāMāyāṇa, Viṣṇū encounters Rāvaṇa, who refuses to give up Sitā, even if it means the death of his son and his brother, and the burning of his kingdom. In the Mahābhārata, Viṣṇū encounters

Yudhishtira, who gambles away his kingdom, his brothers, his wife, even his own identity, rather than simply accept defeat. He encounters Duryodhana, who would rather plunge his family into a war that will kill millions than give up a 'needlepoint of land'. There is pride, jealousy, rage and the rationalization of all desires. These patterns are neverending, and can be experienced in every society, at all times.



Deva, Asura and Viṣṇū



Darśan Breaks the Cycle

The idea that **life has no beginning (anādī) and no end (ananta)**, that our existence has no borders, no starting or finishing line, stands in **direct contrast to modern ideas based on Greek mythology**, where life is like an Olympic race where we have to 'win'. The winners of Greek mythology found a place for themselves in the **afterlife, called Elysium**. **In Abrahamic mythology, those who align to the will and word of Bhagavān reach heaven, the rest go to hell**. Rebirth takes away the sense of urgency and the quest for perfection that are the hallmarks of Western thought. The Gītā does not speak of changing the world. It speaks of appreciating the world that is always changing. Belief in one life makes us want to change the world, control it or resign to the way things are. Belief in rebirth enables us to appreciate all three possibilities, without clinging to any.

Taken psychologically, the idea of rebirth is about having multiple opportunities to break the cycle of fear and find meaning, without 'consuming' anyone.

When you live only once, the value of your life becomes the sum total of your achievements. Hence the need to align or achieve, which are the driving forces of Western thought. In Christianity and Islam it involves conversion to the right way of living. In Greek mythology (or secularism), it is about being a hero by either winning a race, or overthrowing oppressors. In either case, we end up controlling, hence consuming, the other. This is entrapment.

But when you live many lives, alignments and achievements are rendered meaningless. What matters is wisdom: an understanding of why this world exists, why we exist, and why we live, again and again, in a merry-go-round. When we understand, we do not seek control of the other, hence are liberated. We engage with the world, but are not entrapped. We are no longer dependent, but we stay dependable.

Arjuna draws attention to the fact that it is tough to stay aligned to a single course, howsoever noble.

KṚṢṆA, what happens to he who strays from the path of insight? Does he lose out on both: happiness promised by wisdom and pleasures promised by indulgence? Does he perish like a torn cloud? — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, verses 37 and 38 (paraphrased).*

KṚṢṆA replies that nothing is wasted or destroyed in the cosmos. All efforts are recorded and they impact future lives.

Those unsuccessful in realization in this life will be reborn. Their efforts will not go in waste. They will ensure they are born in a wise family, where they can strive again. They will be driven to wisdom on account of memories and impressions of previous lives. By striving through many lives, they untangle themselves to unite with divinity. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, verses 41 to 45 (paraphrased).*

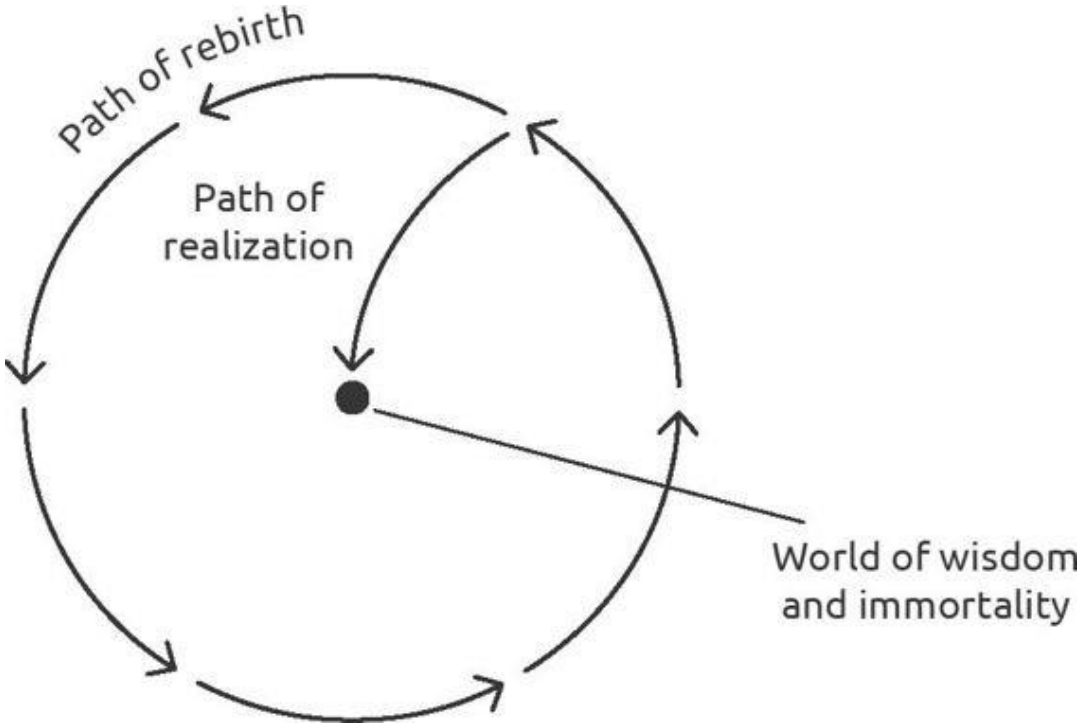
In a way KṚṢṆA is alluding to Yama, the Bhagavān of death in the Purāṇas, who has an accountant called Chitargupta, who keeps a record of all deeds. This record determines the circumstances of our future lives: the parents we shall have, the gender we shall acquire, the fortunes and misfortunes we shall experience. How we respond to what we carry forward from our previous lives will determine what we carry forward to our future lives. Escape is possible if there is nothing to carry forward.

Arjuna, there are two paths, one of return and the other of no return. The wise, the connected, know the difference and choose the one of no return. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 8, verses 26 and 27 (paraphrased).*

Thus, rebirth offers a second chance. In the RāMāyāṇa, Rāma's ancestors, the sons of Sāgara, are burned to death by the fiery glance of the sage called Kapila because they wrongly accuse him of stealing their horse. Their grandson begs Indra, who had stolen the horse in the first place, to let the celestial river Maṅdākīnī flow down on earth as the Gaṅgā. Washed by its waters, the sons of Sāgara get the chance of a second life. Another life is another chance: either to stay

entrapped in the cycle of fear or break free by discovering the architecture of the world and observing it without judgement. This is why, in Hindu funerals, the corpse is first burned and then the ashes and bones are cast in the river. Fire and running water represent the two paths mentioned in Chapter 8 of The Gītā, one offering liberation and the other offering entrapment.

> Arjuna, the two paths are twins: like fire and smoke, the waxing and waning moons, the course of the rising sun towards the north before rains and towards the south after.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 8, verses 24 and 25 (paraphrased).*



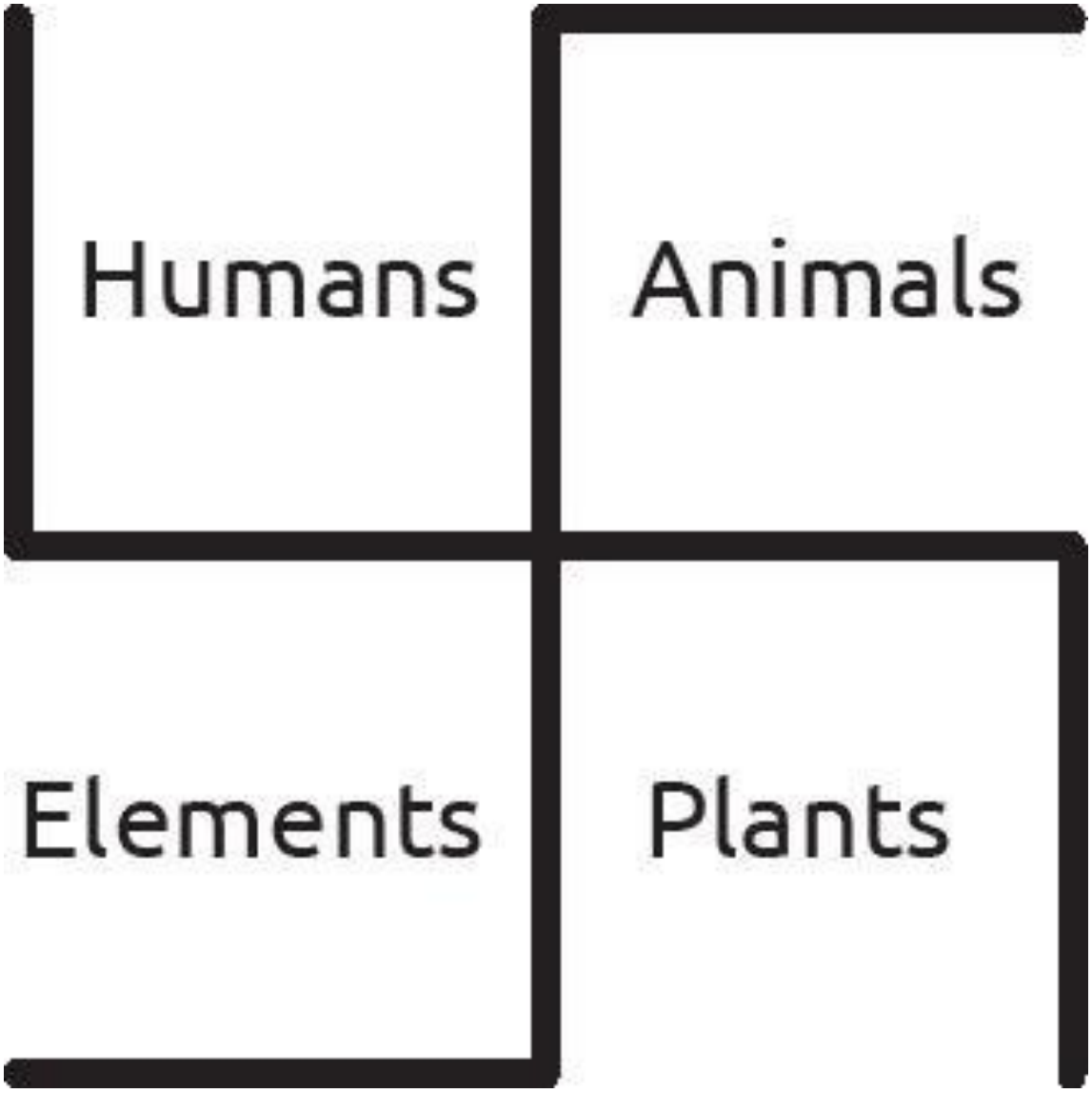
The Two Paths of Rebirth and Liberation

This life is not the first time you and I have experienced each other. We have been here before, but we have not learned, from past experiences, that much of life defies explanation and control, that life always offers a second chance and that the world existed before us and will continue to exist after us. As long as we resist reality, we will not discover the immortal, and go from lifetime to lifetime, hungry for meaning and Validation.

3.
You and I experience life differently

Is the idea of immortality and rebirth real or conceptual? What is real? Can the conceptual be real? Our understanding of reality is a function of the capabilities of our body or **deha**, home of the ātmā. What is real for a plant is not real for an animal, what is real for one human is not real for another. Nature is all about diversity. This understanding of the body, the instrument through which we experience and express reality, is not explicitly a part of The Gītā, but certainly a part of Vedic knowledge elaborated in the Upanishads, that KṚṢṆA assumes Arjuna to be familiar with.

The body of a rock is different from the body of a plant, which is different from the body of an animal, which is different from the body of a human. And so, what a rock experiences is different from what a plant, animal or human experiences. Human experiences are further complicated by different modes of expression: some humans express accurately, others imaginatively; some speak literally and others use metaphors. Further, what is reality for humans cannot be the reality of Bhagavān. Hindu mythology constantly refers to this **four-fold division of the world**—the world of **elements**, **plants**, **animals** and **humans**. Symbolically, it is **represented by the swastika**.



Four-fold Division of the World

The elements (bhutas)—sky, earth, wind, water and fire—constitute the world. However, they do not experience the world, as they do not possess organs (indriyas) to sense or respond to what is around them. Stars, rocks and rivers are not sentient. They move, but do not act. They do not seek opportunities or avoid threats. They do not feel or think. If they do, we do not know, as they cannot express themselves, or at least we cannot fathom their responses. They do not seem to experience death, as they do not demonstrate any struggle for life. Even fire, that needs fuel to survive, does not seek out fuel. It simply dies out when the fuel is exhausted. Elements are therefore considered अजीव lifeless (a-jiva).

Plants, animals and humans constitute the सजीव living (sa-jiva). They depend on air प्राण (prāṇa) and so are called breathers प्राणी (prāṇī). To stay alive, and keep breathing, living organisms seek food. To find food, plants grow and animals run. Both experience hunger and fear. They want to eat, not be eaten. They want to live, not die. They fight to survive.

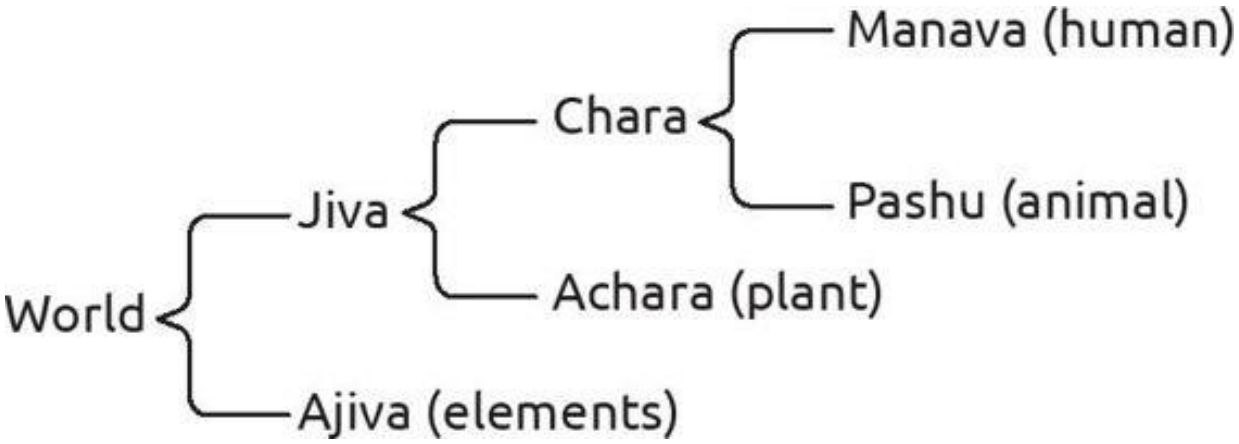
Plants have ज्ञानेन्द्रिय sense organs (gyāna-indriyas) to sense the external world and respond to water, sunlight and change of seasons. But they are अचर immobile (a-chara), unable to run from danger, unlike animals (chara) which clearly have more कर्मेन्द्रिय response organs (karma-indriyas). The five sense organs are eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. The five response organs are hands, legs, mouth, anus and genitals.

Animals, especially ones with larger brains, display a greater degree of emotions (chitta) and some degree of intelligence (buddhi). They remember things. They make choices. They solve simple problems. They form packs to find food, hives to store food and herds to protect themselves. They establish pecking orders to get a greater share of food and mates. They take care of their young. Some even display personality.

Humans are dramatically different. In us, senses, emotions and intelligence are highly developed. But what really makes us unique is our imagination (manas). While plants and animals experience hunger, fear and death, humans can imagine infinite hunger and infinite fear and infinite death. Humans can also imagine a world without hunger, fear or death. Hence, the idea of immortality! The ability to conjure up a conceptual reality (how the world should be) different from emotional experience (how the world feels) or sensory experiences (what is actually sensed) is unique to human beings and unique for every human being. Your reality is different from my reality, because your body is different, your filters are different, your experiences are different, your knowledge is different.

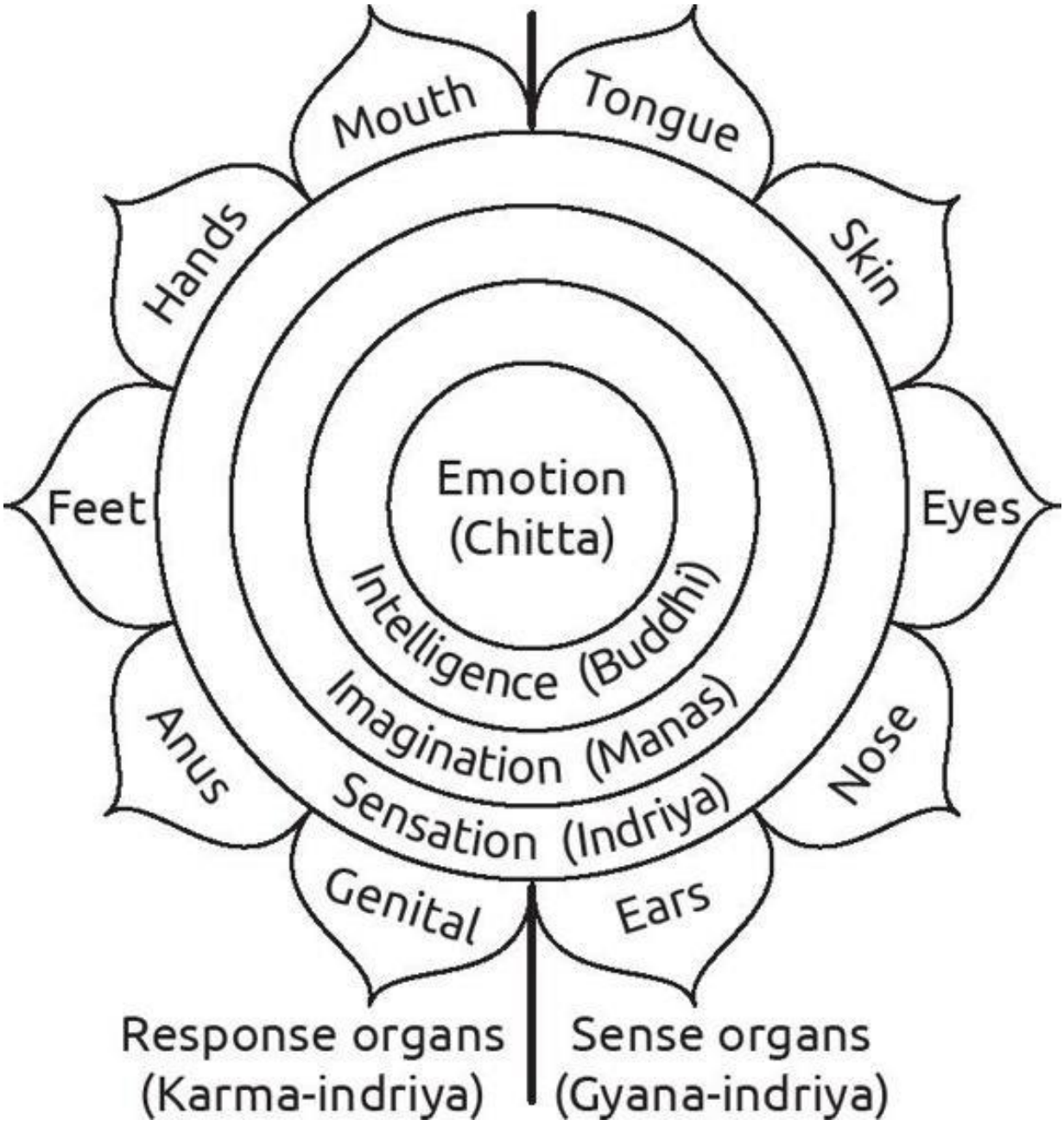
KṚṢṆA experiences every slice (bhāga) of reality, that of elements, plants, animals as well as humans. That is why he is called Bhagavān (bhaga-vān) in The Gītā.

> Arjuna, know that I am the sun, the moon, the fire. I am the sap that makes plants blossom. I am the digestive fire and breath of animals. I eat. I think, remember, understand and forget as humans do. I am the transmitter, the teacher, the scholar and the wise. I am the perishable and the imperishable. And that which supports both. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 15, verses 12 to 18 (paraphrased).*



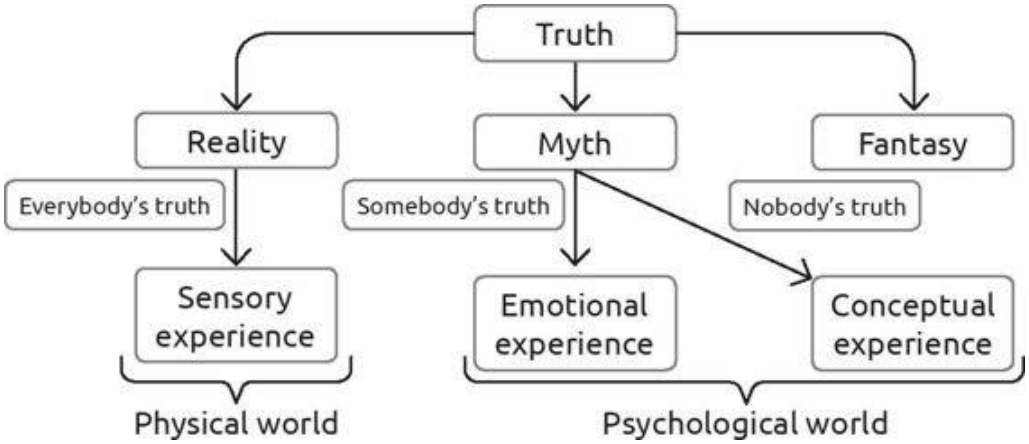
Many Bodies in Nature

In Vedāṅta, the body is visualized as a series of containers. The flesh is the outermost container and is made up of the senses. It is composed of food and serves as food, and so it is called the container of food (anna-kosha). It is animated by the container of breath (prāṇī-kosha). Within are the container of thoughts (mana-kosha), the container of beliefs (vi-gyāna-kosha or buddhi- kosha) and finally the container of emotions (chitta-kosha). In plants, there are only the containers of the flesh and the breath. In animals, there are the containers of the flesh, breath and emotions. In some animals there is also the container of thoughts, influencing emotions. Only in humans is found the container of beliefs, ideas that humans use to make sense of the world around. Our thoughts and beliefs shape our emotions; our emotions also determine our thoughts and beliefs.



Five Containers of the Body

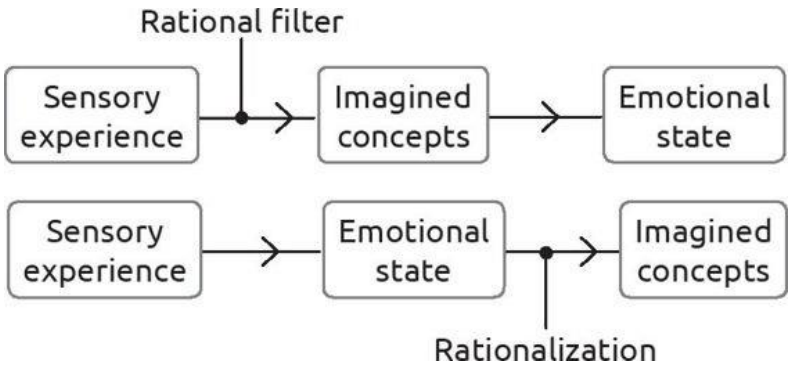
These five containers create three realities: sensory reality that depends on the flesh (indriyas), emotional reality that depends on the heart (chitta) and conceptual reality that depends on imagination (manas) and intelligence (buddhi). Elements (bhutas) inhabit none of these realities. Plants (a-chara) inhabit the sensory reality. Higher animals (chara) inhabit the emotional reality as well. But only humans (manavas) inhabit all three.



Three Realities

What distinguishes humans from the rest of nature is our ability to imagine reality. We can conjure up the opposite of what we experience. While the senses experience pain, our mind can imagine happiness. While the senses experience pleasure, our mind can imagine sorrow. While the senses experience form, our mind can imagine formlessness. While the senses experience finiteness, our mind can imagine infiniteness. While the senses experience mortality, our mind can imagine immortality.

Imagination helps us create concepts, which filter our sensory inputs and ultimately impact our emotional experience. Thus, we can imagine a rock or river to be a deity and so condition ourselves to feel joyful whenever we encounter that rock or river. Our emotional experiences can also inform and shape our concepts. So, when a rock or river gives us joy in some way, we declare it must be a deity. Concepts therefore help us rationalize emotions; emotions help us rationalize concepts—it is a two-way process.



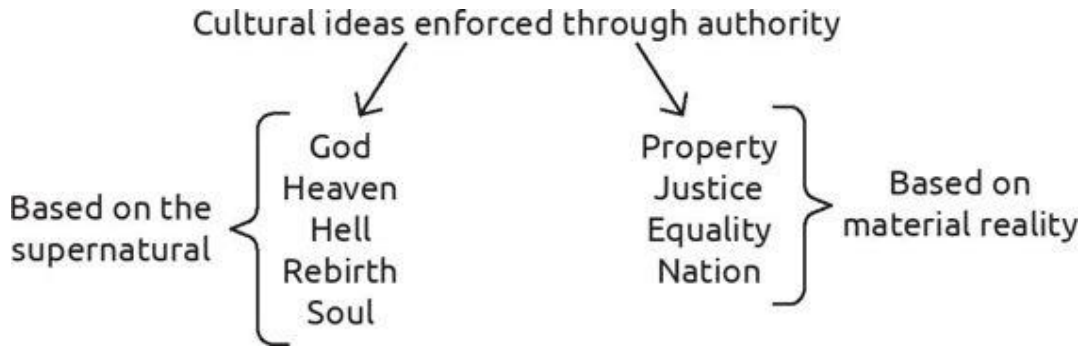
Mental Processes

When presented with the same stimuli, all plants and animals of the same species usually respond in a similar way. Variations are few, and mostly in higher animals. However, the same set of stimuli is read differently by different humans who harbour different concepts. This is why Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Duryodhana and Arjuna respond to the battleground of Kuru- kśetra very differently. The journey from human to divine is to achieve conceptual clarity and appreciate the world as it is, while empathizing with how others perceive it.

But are concepts real? Are they not products of the imagination? How can we value imagination?

This distinguishing of the imaginary from the real overlooks the fact that humans are humans because of the ability to imagine. All the things that we value — justice, equality, free speech, human rights— are actually concepts churned out of imagination, just like ideas such as Bhagavān, heaven, hell, rebirth and immortality. We may classify these ideas as secular or religious, rational or supernatural, value one over the other, but they are essentially creations of humans, by humans, for humans. They are artificial constructions, not natural phenomena. They have no independent existence outside humans.

Even our identity (aham) is essentially how we imagine ourselves, a concept. Nature does not care for our tribal roots, our social structures or our cultural hierarchies. It does not care for how we qualify our actions or judge each other. Yet our identity matters to us, as do our concepts, because we are human. Our concepts establish our humanity and help us cope with the terror of nature and biology.



Imagined Concepts

That Arjuna grants himself an identity (Pāṅdava, Kaunteya, Kuru), gives meaning to people around him (friends and family), ascribes value to his action (good or bad) and predicts its reactions (collapse of society) stems from his ability to imagine, construct or inherit boundaries and inhabit conceptual spaces. It is an indicator of his humanity.

> Arjuna, the senses exist beyond the physical; mind beyond the senses; intelligence beyond the mind. Beyond intelligence is your sense of self. By knowing who you really are you will conquer all yearning. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, verses 42 and 43 (paraphrased).*

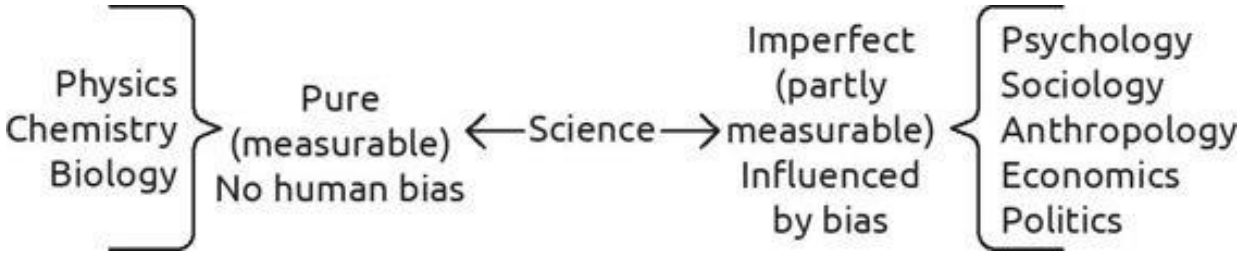
The conceptual reality of KṚṢṆA — where immortality is a fact — makes him function without fear, and gain insight about life without imposing the filter of conflict. The conceptual reality of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana — where victimhood is a fact — makes them function in rage, imagine persecution and harbour an intense desire to change the world. Which imagination is the appropriate one?

Science does not share The Gītā's enthusiasm about imagination. Science values the finite, the measurable entity, while The Gītā values the infinite (ananta) and the immortal (nitya), which are unmeasurable concepts.

The reality constructed by science is dependent on measuring instruments. However, it is easier to measure things than feelings. This is why physics, chemistry and biology are considered 'pure' sciences, while psychology is considered a 'pseudo' or 'imperfect' science. We can at best use bodily responses to emotions to understand the functioning of the mind, as neuropsychology and behavioural science tend to do.

The humanities, subjects such as sociology, history, economics, management and politics, which involve humans, are no longer called 'social sciences' because while the data may be computed scientifically, the analysis is invariably influenced by the prejudice of

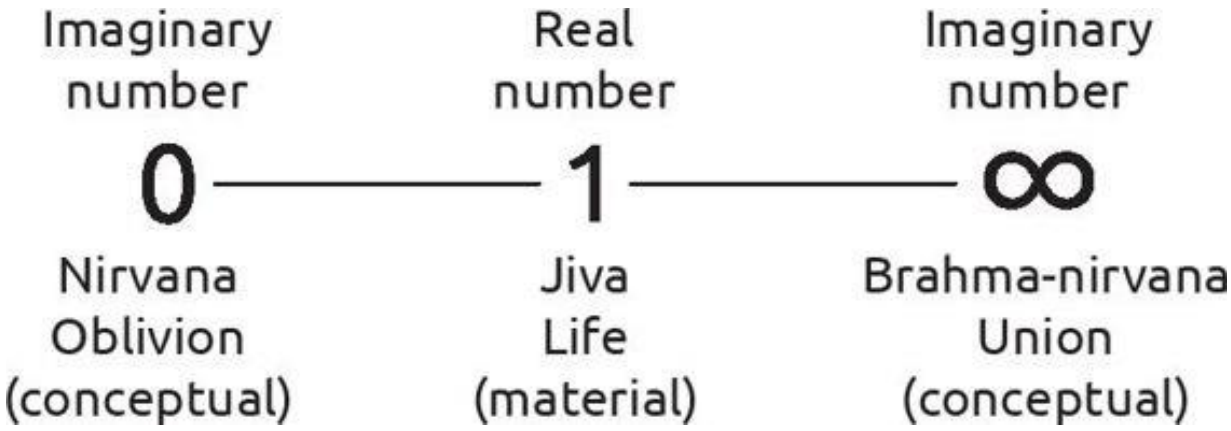
the analyst, the philosophy he subscribes to and the concepts he believes to be true.



Classification of Sciences

That being said, concepts do play a key role in science, especially mathematics. Zero (Śuṅya) and infinity (ananta) are called imagined numbers, because their existence cannot be proven in material reality. I can show you one tree, two trees, three trees, but I cannot show you 'zero trees' or 'infinite trees'. These have to be imagined.

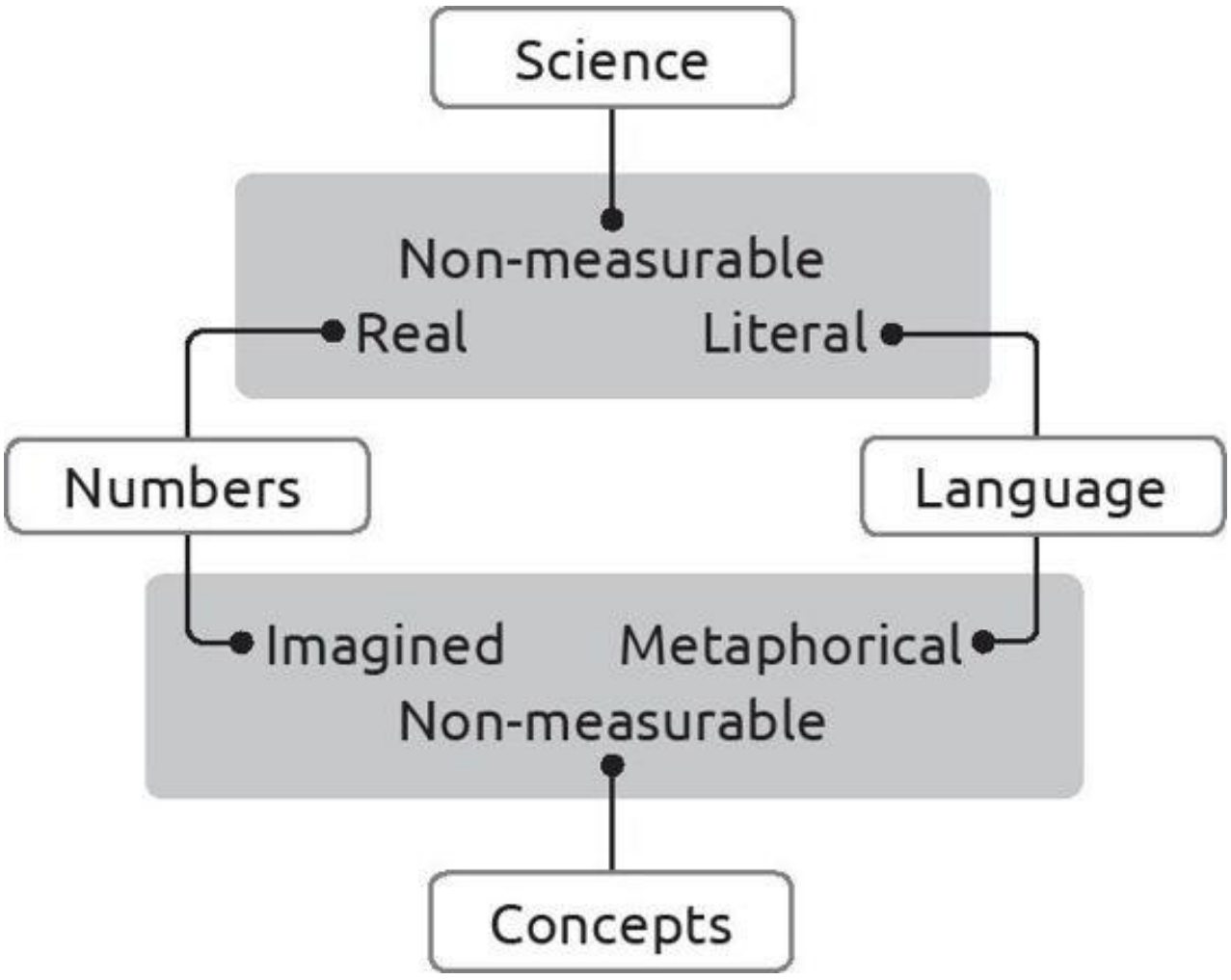
Civilizations existed and thrived without the knowledge of these concepts for centuries. Buddhist, Jain and Hindu philosophers of India conceived both infinity and zero over two thousand years ago in their attempt to understand both the psychological and the physical world. The hermits preferred the concept of withdrawal into oblivion, hence zero, while the householders preferred the concept of embracing everything, hence infinity. Today, zero and infinity play a key role in calculus and help scientists around the world solve technological problems of the real world.



Concepts in Philosophy and Math

Like infinity and zero, **immortality** is **also a concept**. By introducing it, KṚṢṆA increases the canvas of Arjuna's experience and expands the denominator of his existence. It makes him look at life differently — this life is not the only life we live; it is but one of many lives; our actions have infinite consequences; we have limitless choices if we open our mind to them. Thus, a shift in imagination brings about a dramatic shift in identity, meaning, value, assumptions and aspirations.

> Arjuna, people worship limited deities, limited as they are by their nature and their yearnings. From me comes their faith. From me comes fulfilment of their faith. The restricted stay restrained. Those who shatter the boundaries discover me: the limitless. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 7, verses 20 to 23 (paraphrased).*



Literal and Metaphorical

Those who are comfortable with imagination appreciate metaphors and symbols. Those who are not prefer the literal. Only through metaphors and symbols can one convey the conceptual. Without poetry, you cannot communicate ideas that are not material and measurable, like love, or justice or remarkability. But The Gītā recognizes that the world is made up of different people, those who can only deal with the tangibility of mortality and those who can deal with the intangibility of immortality and rebirth. KṚṢṆA does not expect people to experience the world the same way as he does or respond to the world exactly as he does. This is why KṚṢṆA has a 'menu-card' approach to solutions, suiting different capabilities and capacities.

> Arjuna, immerse your mind in me and I will uplift you from the ocean of recurring death. If you cannot do that, then practise yoga and work on your mind. If you cannot do that, then do your work as if it is my work. If you cannot do that, then make yourself my instrument and do as I say. If you cannot do that, then simply do your job and leave the results to me. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 12, verses 6 to 11 (paraphrased).*

> My deha is different from yours. My hungers are different from yours. My assumptions are different from yours. My capabilities are different from yours. My experiences are diferent from yours. My expressions are different from yours.

4.
You and I seek meaning

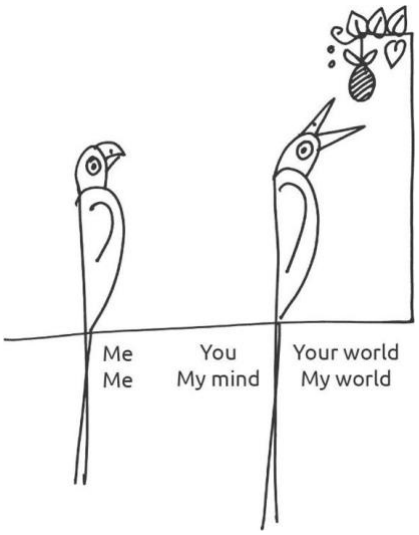
The immortal resident of the body, the **dehi**, watches how the body experiences the world around it. But what is dehi exactly? Is it the senses that make the body responsive to external stimuli? Is it the mind within the body, or thoughts and ideas and imaginations within the mind, or concepts that filter all sensation and influence emotions? It is something unmeasurable, mystifying and debatable, like consciousness? Or is it conceptual clarity that bestows tranquillity? Does that conceptual clarity involve appreciating the unique human ability to give meaning to ourselves and the world around? We shall explore these ideas in this chapter.

Right at the start of The Gītā, KṚṢṆA refers to **dehi**, **the immortal that dwells in the body**.

> Arjuna, weapons cannot pierce it, fire cannot burn it, water cannot wet it, wind cannot dry it. It is everywhere, at all times, fixed, immovable. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, verses 23 and 24 (paraphrased).*

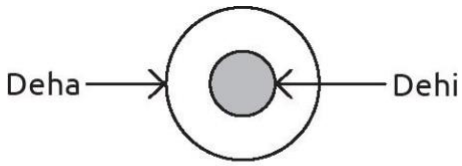
Later, he refers to **dehi as ātmā**, the immortal located in the body, but **beyond the reach of the senses and the mind**.

Arjuna, detached, tranquil, assured, the observer resides in the city of nine gates. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 5, Verse 13 (paraphrased).*



Bird Watching the Bird Eating Fruit

The Ṛg Veda speaks of a bird that watches another bird eating fruit. This is a metaphor of the world (fruit), the body (bird eating fruit) and the dehi (bird watching bird eating fruit). We can watch others, and ourselves, seeking 'fruit'.



Deha and Dehi

KṚṢṆA describes dehi, located inside the body, very much the same way as he describes puruśa, located inside all of nature that surrounds the body. If dehi is within the self, puruśa is within the other.

Arjuna, prakriti is responsible for all events around you. Puruśa, resident of nature, experiences these events as painful and pleasurable circumstances.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, verses 20 and 21 (paraphrased).*

The body we inhabit, and nature that is all around our body, is tangible (sa-guna). What resides in our body, and in nature, is not (nir-guna). **Deha and prakriti are within the reach of the senses**; they are bound by the rules of space and time, which means that they can be measured and are impermanent. **Dehi and puruśa, however, are outside the reach of the senses**, and are not bound by rules of space and time, which means that they cannot be measured and are permanent.

Deha is part of prakriti. But is dehi a part of puruśa. Since both are immortal and infinite, neither can be confined by space, nor can they be separated. In other words, **dehi is the same as puruśa**.

> Arjuna, it is both in and out, inside the animate and the inanimate, far as well as near, difficult to gauge as it is subtle. It is not divisible yet appears divided in separate beings. It is what brings together and creates anew. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, verses 15 and 16 (paraphrased).*

Deha is that which separates us from other entities. Dehi is that which unites us to others. Deha establishes individuality. Dehi establishes universality. We discover deha through analysis (sāṅkhya), by figuring out what isolates us from the world. We discover dehi through synthesis (yoga), by figuring out what connects us with the world. Arjuna's deha is not the same as Duryodhana's, Arjuna's deha is not the same as that of the horses that pull his chariot, but the dehi in Arjuna enables him to feel the fear and hunger in every living creature, and its absence in non-living creatures.

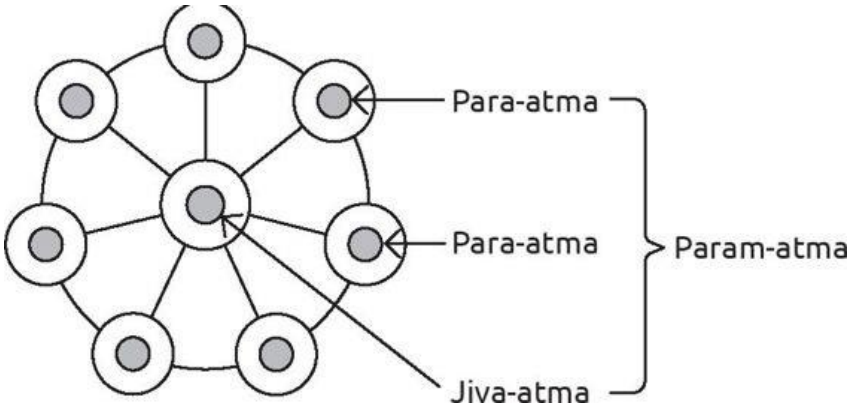
Body	Deha	Dehi
Outside body	Prakriti	Purusha
	Visible Measurable Sa-guna	Not visible Non-measurable Nir-guna

Deha and Prakriti

Dehi and puruśa are the same, yet they are also differentiated. Dehi is called jiva-ātmā and puruśa is called param-ātmā, as dehi's experience is limited by the deha it resides in, while puruśa's experience is unlimited, as it resides in limitless prakriti. Dehi or jiva-ātmā experiences a slice (bhaga) of reality. Bhagavān, who experiences every slice of reality, is then param-ātmā. The jiva-ātmā, who seeks fulfilment and fullness, is the bhakta. Every living creature is a jiva-ātmā. For every **जीवात्मा jiva-ātmā**, other living creatures are **परात्मा para-ātmā** (the individual other). The collective of all living creatures makes up the **परमात्मा param-ātmā** (the collective other).

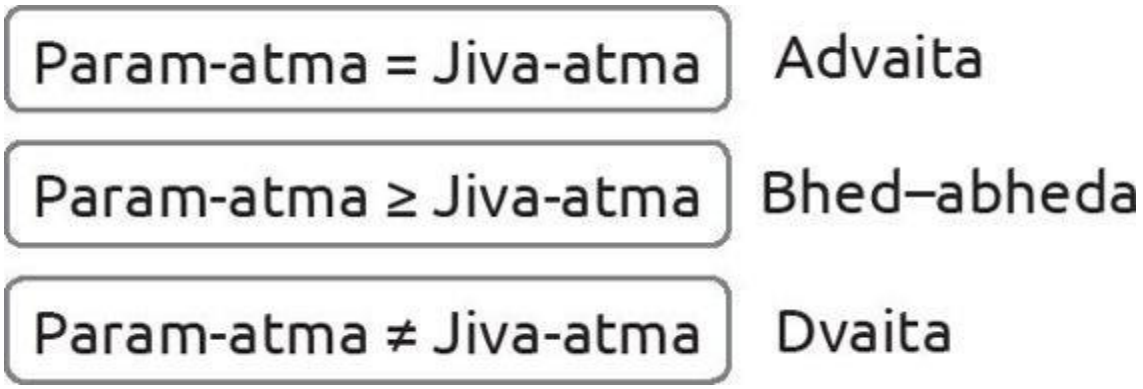
This relationship of the deha, prakriti and ātmā is best visualized in art as a spoked wheel, where the hub represents my body (deha) and the rim presents the body of the world around me (prakriti). The ātmā within us (jiva-ātmā) radiates like the spokes of a wheel and connects with the ātmā (para-ātmā) within everyone around us. All of this together constitutes param-ātmā, the potential that everyone, including us, can realize. Such a spoked wheel whirls around KṚṢṆA's finger, indicating that param-ātmā is more than the sum total of all individual jiva-ātmās. The jiva-ātmā depends on the param-ātmā but the param- ātmā is not dependent on the jiva-ātmā.

> Arjuna, he is the perceiver of all sense objects without the senses. He is unattached, yet sustainer of all. He is devoid of all tendencies, yet the enjoyer of all material tendencies.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, Verse 14 (paraphrased).*



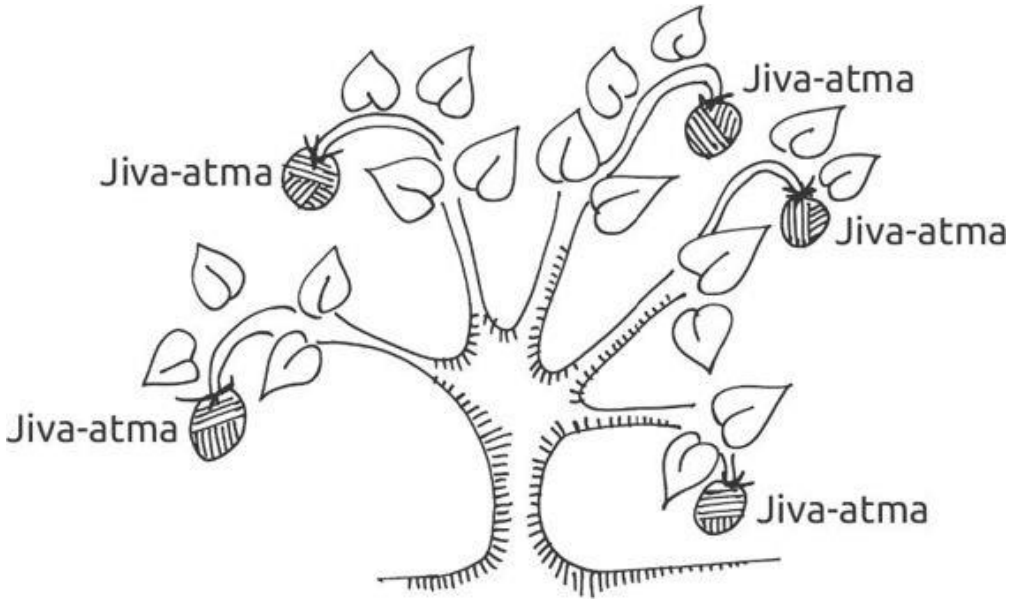
Wheel

Exploration of the relationship between jiva-ātmā and param-ātmā, between dehi and deha, puruśa and prakriti, Bhagavān and bhakta, has led to the many schools of Vedāṅta, schools that seek the essence of the Vedas. Advaita saw no difference between divinity and humanity; dvaita saw a complete separation; bheda-abheda saw humanity as part of the divine.



Different Schools of Vedāṅta

Many see dehi as the seed of the puruśa-tree. Each seed is separate from the tree, dependent on the tree, yet containing the tree. This idea is expressed in a beautiful hymn on completeness **पूर्णमदः पूर्णमिदम्** (poornamadah poornamidam) found in the Isha Upanishad: 'This is complete, that is complete, from completeness comes completeness, when completeness is added or subtracted, it still remains complete.' This hymn refers to the concept of infinity and the capability of human imagination. You are complete in yourself; I am complete in myself; yet we are part of a wider human narrative. Like the seed of the tree, we are part of completeness, as well as our complete selves.



Fruits of the Param-ātmā Tree

So what exactly is dehi/ātmā/puruśa? Various metaphors are used to describe it in The Gītā: the ocean that is fed by rivers but never overflows (Chapter 2, Verse 70); the sky that is ever-present but always detached (Chapter 13, Verse 33); the sun that illuminates everything (Chapter 13, Verse 34). From Chapter 7 onwards, KṚṢṆA personifies the idea and starts equating himself with dehi and puruśa, using the first person. Though KṚṢṆA sports a male form, he refers to his 'wombs', indicating the metaphorical nature of the language used.

> Arjuna, forms and formless are my two wombs. I am the start and the end, the thread on which the world is strung like jewels. Nothing else but me. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 7, verses 6 and 7 (paraphrased).*

Some identify dehi/puruśa/ātmā with the soul. But **soul is a Christian concept** and in Christian mythology, especially, there is talk of souls **that can get corrupted** and bodies without souls. Dehi/puruśa/**ātmā of The Gītā is eternally pure and permeates everywhere**, even beings deemed most sinful and foul.

Some say dehi is not material, hence it must be something spiritual. We must be careful of this term, spiritual. It is an eighteenth-century European term that once referred to everything from the

psychological to the paranormal and the occult, a meaning that is still popular in New Age religious orders. The West formally separated the psychological from the paranormal only in the twentieth century after the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, though religious folk continue to insist that the paranormal is real.

If not material, then dehi/puruśa/ātmā can be mental. But it is also distinguished from all things that constitute the mind: senses (indriyas), emotions (chitta), imagination (manas) and intelligence (buddhi). Some, therefore, identify it with consciousness, the ability to be self-aware. But scientists and gurus disagree on what consciousness exactly is. **Scientists restrict consciousness to living organisms**, especially higher ones, while **gurus attribute consciousness to all of nature, even the inanimate**.

Some identify the soul/spirit/consciousness as conscience (viveka). But conscience is an outcome of imagination and judgement: how we imagine ourselves and how we want others to judge us. Animals do not have a conscience, but for Hindus, ātmā is present in everything.

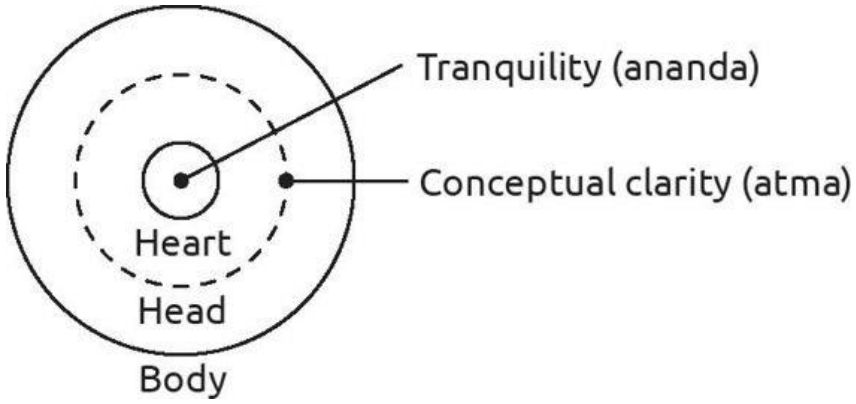
Ultimately, the exact identity of dehi/puruśa/ātmā will always be elusive, not just because it defies objective measurement, but also because you and I experience reality very differently and use different words to describe our experiences. What is dehi to you may not be dehi to me. Also, what I thought dehi was today may not be what I realize dehi is tomorrow. Initially, dehi may be the mind, then it becomes intelligence, then consciousness, then imagination, concept, meaning, then something else which defies language. But it exists. And that is the point.

> Arjuna, it exists in the heart of all beings that which is worth knowing, the knowledge itself, and that which is reached through knowledge. It is the light that illuminates life, and all of darkness too. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, Verse 17 (paraphrased).*

What we can be sure of is that **dehi cannot be an entity, as by definition it cannot be measured. It has to be a concept. It can at best be experienced, hence it is a subjective truth, indifferent to the rules of science**.

> Arjuna, it has no beginning and has no qualities, and so does not change. It is located in the body, but it does nothing and covets nothing. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, verses 31 and 32 (paraphrased).*

According to the five-container architecture of the body described in the Upanishads, our breath resides within our flesh, our mind resides within our breath, our concepts reside within our mind and our emotions reside within our concepts. We can only see the flesh and breath. We can sense the emotions by the way they are expressed through the body and the breath. Sensations received by the mind are filtered by concepts to create emotions. Emotions affect our mind and shape our concepts. When there is conceptual clarity, we experience tranquillity (ānanda), no matter what the sensory experience is. Ātmā then becomes an idea that offers conceptual clarity, that establishes connection (yoga) with the world as it really is, not what we imagine it to be.

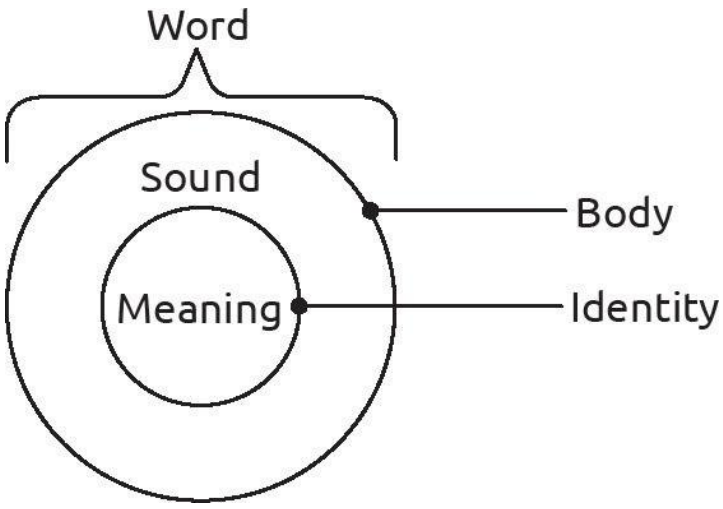


Ātmā as Conceptual Clarity

In the absence of conceptual clarity, the dominant emotion is fear, fear of losing opportunities, fear of threats, fear of achievement, fear of abandonment, fear of inVālīdation. The emotion of fear impacts the way we think and what we believe. It contaminates the filtering of

sensations and choice of responses. It creates a vicious cycle where ātmā is eclipsed by aham, our judgemental self.

Conceptual clarity draws attention to language, a key theme of the Vedas. Many animals use language to communicate. Their language is descriptive. Human language is used to analyse, construct and convey complex meaning. Through sound, image or gesture meaning is conveyed. That which is expressed (shabda) contains layers of meaning (shabda-brahmana), some literal, some metaphorical. These evoke multiple emotions (rasa) and experiences (bhāva). Shabda is tangible (sa-guna), shabda-brahmana is intangible (nir-guna). Only through shabda, can shabda-brahmana be expressed and experienced. If we imagine our body as a shabda, then we are containers of meaning. Only thorugh our bodies can that meaning be expressed and experienced. When Hindus say that everything around us has ātmā, and bow to rocks and rivers, plants, animals, and humans, it is an acknowledgement that everyone and everything is meaningful and Vālīd.

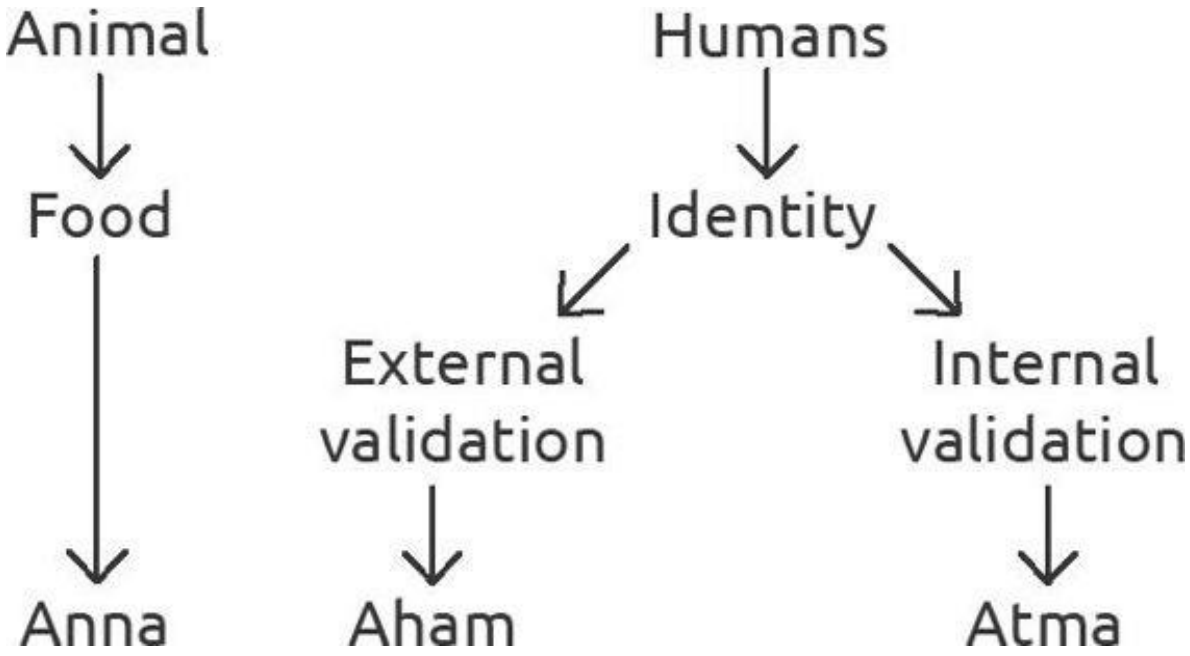


Ātmā as Meaning

Like animals that seek food for their survival, humans yearn for meaning for their sanity: what is our value, our purpose and our identity in this world? As long as we seek Vālīdation from the world around us, we are entrapped by aham. As soon as we realize that all meaning comes from within, that it is we who make the world meaningful, we are liberated by ātmā.

Arjuna, this fabulous all-encompassing being who resides within you, who is me really, and you really, is that which observes, approves, enables and enjoys ultimately.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, Verse 22 (paraphrased).*

When we say that everything around us has ātmā, and we bow to rocks and rivers, plants and animals, to people around us, living and dead, we essentially mean that everything around is meaningful and Vālīd. Who decides this? The dehi within, as well as the puruśa without. We give meaning to others. We get meaning from others. We give meaning to each other. We may die but things continue to be meaningful, for ātmā never dies. There is always someone to give meaning.



Food and Meaning

Plants and animals, including humans, seek food. Additionally, humans also seek meaning: the dehi within the deha, the meaning within the word, the soul within the body, the metaphorical within the literal.

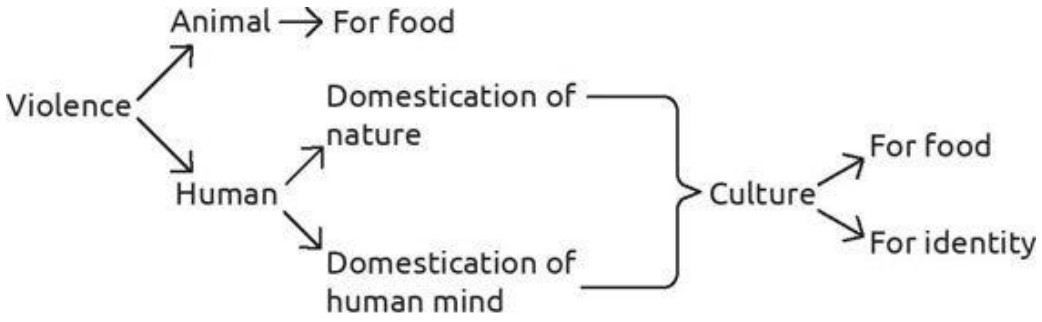
5.
You and I have to face consequences

The quest for food, security and meaning propels the living into action. Every action has reactions. Reactions create circumstances that we constantly experience. Can we control our circumstances, create fortune and avoid misfortune, by regulating our actions and the actions of others? Or can we simply withdraw from activity, turn away from all sensory seductions, save ourselves from disappointment and heartbreak, and thus find peace? Is there such a thing as good action and bad action? Can good actions have bad reactions and bad actions, good? Answers to these questions constitute the doctrine of **karma** that means both action as well as reaction, which KṚṢṆA elaborates in Chapter 3 of The Gītā.

In nature, gravity forces movement in all things inanimate. Plants defy gravity and grow towards the sky, propelled by the fear of death to seek sunlight and consume it as food, along with minerals and water pulled up by their roots. Animals graze and hunt and migrate for food. The act of eating is violent, as elements and plants and animals are devoured by the hungry. Where there is life, there is hunger. Where there is hunger, there is food. Where there is food, there is violence. Where there is violence, there are consequences. Nature is violent, as the hungry seek food. This is the fundamental truth of life.

In human society, violence is regulated. Forests are destroyed to make way for fields. Riverbanks are destroyed to create dams and canals. Natural ecosystems are wiped out to make way for human settlements. In the Mahābhārata, the Pāṅdavas burn the forest of Khandava-prastha to build their city of Indra-prastha. The price is high: the resident snake people, the nagas, never forgive them or their descendants.

In human society, violence transforms: it is not just physical. It is also psychological, as people are stripped of their freedom, bound by rules, located in hierarchies and restricted by boundaries. Culture is created by domestication: the violent control of the earth and the violent control of the human mind.



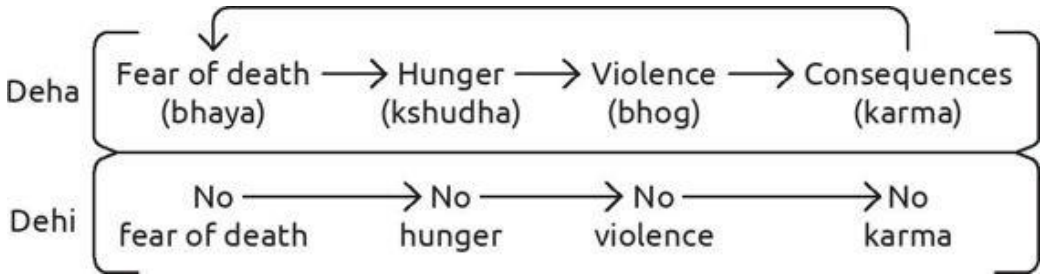
Forms of Violence

So when Arjuna wonders if it is better to withdraw from the battle, KṚṢṆA does not endorse this apparently noble choice. For non-violence is only possible when one gives up hunger, and no one, not even a hermit, can give up all hunger. His body needs nourishment and for that he needs food. The act of cultivation of food is violent, as is the act of keeping away those who wish to steal our food. Only the non-living (a-jiva) are non-violent as they are not hungry. The living (sa-jiva) eat; eating involves violence.

> Arjuna, even when you do nothing, you still act. By simply withdrawing from society, you do not get freedom. Everyone who is born, who is alive, who is dependent, acts, compelled to do so by nature itself. He who controls the senses but has a mind full of cravings is a pretender who fools himself. Do what you have to do, rather than not doing anything at all. You need to act

if you want your body to function.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, verses 4 to 8 (paraphrased).*

The ātmā, resident of the body, is never hungry, and so does not crave food, and so is not violent. It witnesses this hunger-propelled violence, without judgement.



Hunger and No Hunger

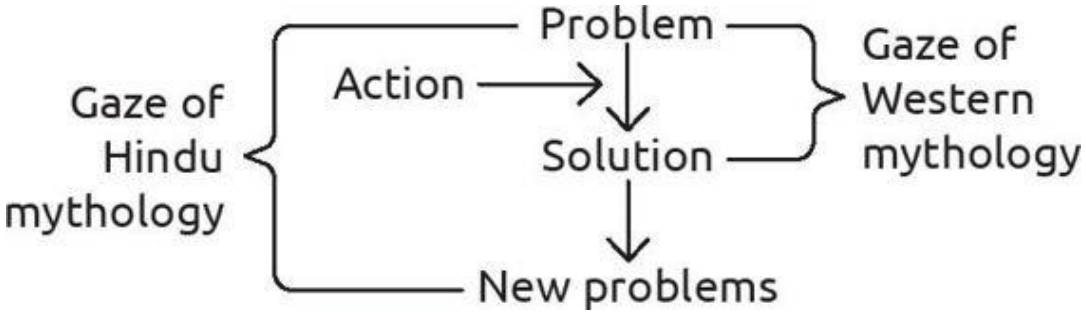
From fear of death comes hunger, hence the quest for food, hence violence. Fear of death by violence makes animals sexual, so that they reproduce and ensure that at least some part of their being outlives death. And that which is reproduced carries with it the fear of death, hence hunger, hence violence and sex. Thus, cause is an action (karma) and the consequence is also an action (karma). **Karma is both action and reaction**. Each moment is a fruit (karma-fala) of the past and a seed (karma-bija) of the future. And just as every seed need not germinate, just as the quality of the fruit depends on various external factors like sunlight and quality of soil and availability of water, the reaction of every action is unpredictable. With unpredictability comes uncertainty, which amplifies fear.

Arjuna, fair or unfair, the results of any action depend on five things: the body, the mind, the instruments, the method and divine grace (luck? fate?). Only the ignorant think they alone are responsible for any outcome.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, verses 13 to 16 (paraphrased).*

This **acceptance of uncertainty is the hallmark of mythologies that believe in rebirth**. Here, the world is always changing and so the point is to observe it, rather than judge or control it. Western mythologies, **in contrast**, speak of a **world that is either**

imperfect (Abrahamic mythology) or **chaotic and unfair (Greek mythology)**. **There is a yearning to change**, to convert, to revolt, to make the world a better place. There is always a goal. Actions are classified as good or bad, right or wrong, moral or amoral, ethical or unethical, depending on the goal.

> Arjuna, as I do not bind myself to the fruit of my action, my actions do not entrap me. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, Verse 14 (paraphrased).*

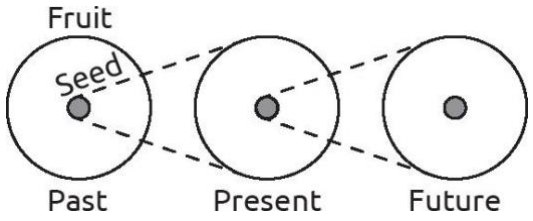


Certainty of Endings

This criticality of a climax or goalpost is alien to Vedic thought.

> Arjuna, those who yearn for pleasure, power and paradise, constantly have their eye on the fruits of their birth, their actions, their rites and rituals. They focus on the Vedas cosmetically. They don't see the meaning within. They never attain wisdom.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, verses 42 to 44 (paraphrased).*

Hindu mythology sees destinations as artificial milestones. What is natural, however, is action. Every action has a reaction, immediate results and long-term repurcussions. Karma refers to both action and reaction. It is cause as well as consequence. It is stimulus as well as response.



Karma-bija and Karma-fala

In nature, there is continuous transformation: spring gives way to summer that brings in the rain, then autumn and finally winter. All animals go through four phases of life: childhood, youth, maturity and old age. Cultures (sanskriti), too, go through multiple phases (yuga): Krita, Treta, Dvapara, Kali. The presence of Rāma or KṚṢṆA does not impact the flow of events. Pralaya or dissolution of culture is as certain as the death of a living being. And just as nature renews itself every year with the rains, just as cultures go through many lifetimes (kalpa), renewing themselves after every collapse (pralaya), so are humans reborn after death.

> Arjuna, that which is born will die and that which will die will be born. So it is pointless to cling and mourn. —*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 27 (paraphrased).*

This idea is made explicit through stories. The RāMāyāṇa does not begin with the birth of Rāma or end with his death. Before he was Rāma, he was Paraśurāma at the end of the Krita yuga. After he was Rāma, he will be KṚṢṆA at the end of the Dvapara yuga. These are various lifetimes of Viṣṇū, who otherwise reclines in Vaikuntha, located on the shoreless ocean of milk, observing worlds rise and fall like waves of the sea.

But humans can imagine: we can imagine a world that is stable and controlled, all evidence in nature and culture notwithstanding. We can imagine attracting fortune and keeping misfortune at bay. And so we can classify actions as good and bad. Actions that help others and us are good. Actions that do not help others or us are bad.

For example, Arjuna imagines the horror that can follow if he kills his family, people he is expected to protect. It will result in a world where no one is trustworthy, a world where no boundaries are Vālīd, where no commitment is sacred, and where integrity has no value. So he concludes his action is Pāpa: karma that will result in misfortune. He considers not fighting family as punya: karma that will result in fortune. But KṚṢṆA points out that it is difficult to distinguish between action that is meritorious and action that is not.

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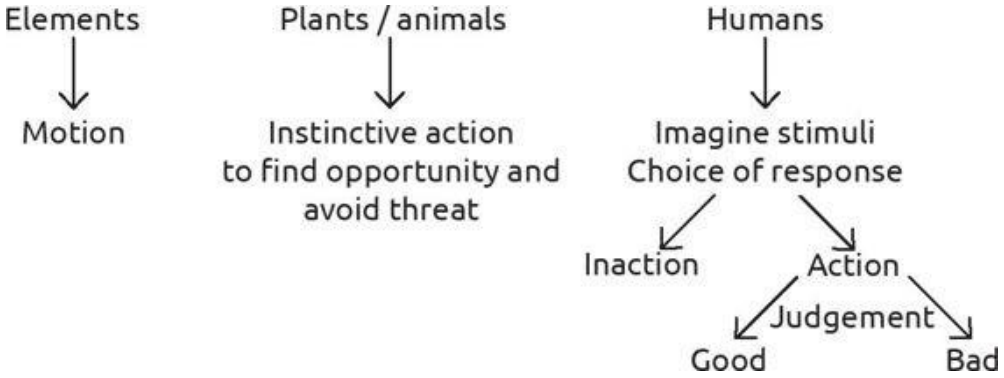
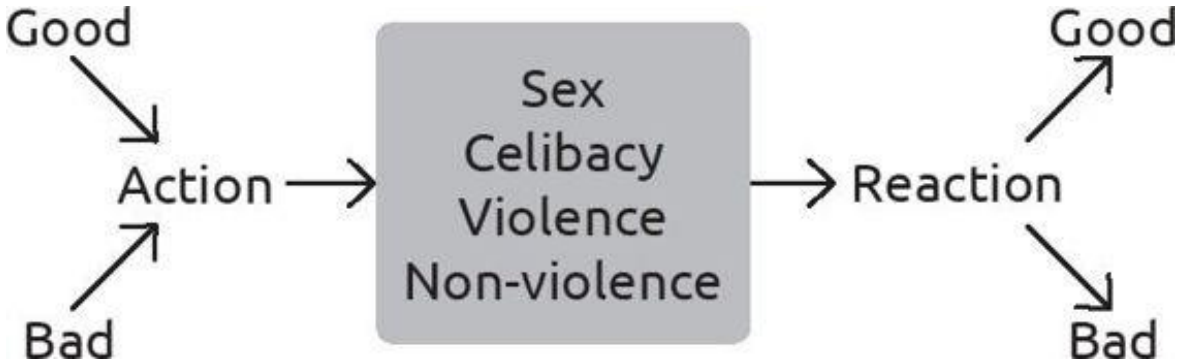
Arjuna, there is appropriate action, incorrect action and inaction, difficult to distinguish. The wise can spot action in inaction and inaction in action. The wise act without clinging to the results of action, are content with whatever is the outcome, and so are unburdened by merit or demerit.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, verses 17 to 22 (paraphrased).*



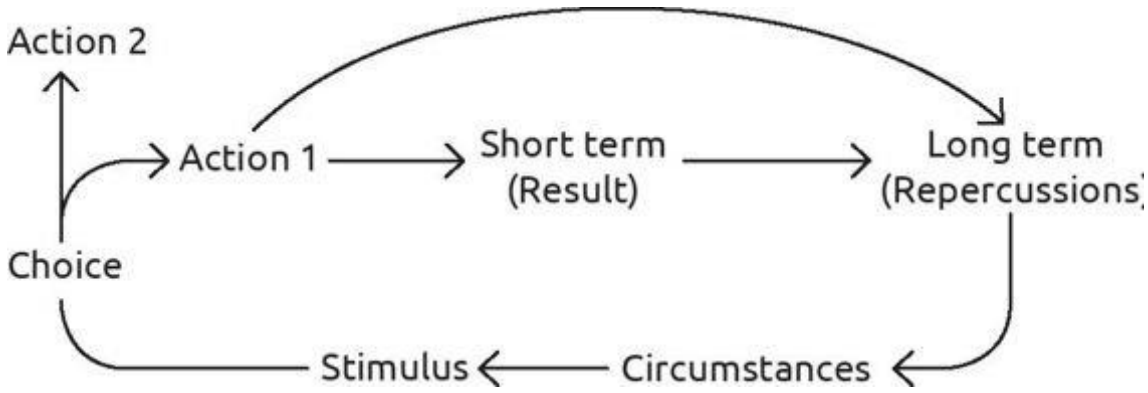
Action of Various Entities

In the RāMāyāṇa, for example, Dashratha keeps his word to Kaikeyi and agrees to give her the two boons she is entitled to. Integrity is good. But the result is the exile of Rāma. That is bad. A reaction may be good in the short term but not in the long term. In the Bhagvata Purāṇa, KṚṢṆA kills Kansa, the dictator of Mathurā. This is good. But Kansa's enraged father-in-law, Jarasandha, burns Mathurā to the ground. This is not good. An apparently good action can have a bad reaction. In the RāMāyāṇa, Sitā goes out of her way to feed a hermit and ends up getting kidnapped. Likewise, an apparently bad action can also have good results. In the Mahābhārata, the burning of the Khandava- prastha forest, which kills many forest creatures, enables the building of the Pāṅdava kingdom of Indra-prastha.



Karma

The complexity of karma is demonstrated in the following Telugu folk tale based on the Mahābhārata: a little girl was drinking milk from a pot when Karṇa's chariot rolled past. Startled, she dropped the pot. The pot broke and the earth soaked up the milk. The girl began to cry. Karṇa saw this, stopped the chariot and decided to get the milk back for the little girl. He took the moist earth in his hand and squeezed out the milk in the pot, much to the girl's astonishment and delight. Everyone praised the great warrior. Thus, Karṇa's action yielded an expected output. But the outcome was unpredictable. The earth was furious that Karṇa had squeezed milk out of her. She swore that one day she would take her revenge. So on the battlefield of Kuru-kśetra, she grabbed hold of Karṇa's chariot wheel, squeezing it as hard as he had squeezed her, forcing him to alight and pull the wheel free. And while he was thus distracted, with his back to the enemy, he was shot dead. His blood fell on the ground and the earth soaked it all up. Karṇa's action thus had two reactions, an immediate one and a subsequent one. The immediate one was perceivable. The subsequent one was not. The latter reaction created the circumstances of Karṇa's death.



Sequence of Cause and Consequence

In the Hindu scheme of things, **circumstances are not created accidentally, or by others, but by our own actions of the past**. We can appreciate this by analysing the RāMāyāṇa. Who is responsible for Sitā's abduction by Rāvaṇa? Should we blame her for taking a risk and feeding a hermit? Should we blame Lakshmana who cruelly cut the nose of Rāvaṇa's sister Surpanakha? Or should we blame Surpanakha who tried to kill Sitā so that her husband, Rāma, would be free to love other women? Should we blame Rāma who refused to

indulge Surpanakha's desires because he wanted to be faithful to his wife? Or should we blame Sitā for accompanying Rāma into the forest where rules of marriage have no meaning? Should we blame Rāma's stepmother, Kaikeyi, for demanding his forest exile? Or should we blame Rāma's father, Dashratha, for giving boons to Kaikeyi that the royal family was bound to uphold? Even if we identify the cause, can we control the action and determine future consequences? Maybe **we can imagine control over our actions, but we have no control over other people's actions**, hence the results.

> Arjuna, you have control over your action alone, not the fruits of your action. So do not be drawn to expectation, or inaction.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 47 (paraphrased).*

Those who believe in karma do not blame. They do not judge. They accept that humans live in a sea of consequences, over which there is limited control. So they accept every moment as it is supposed to be. They act without expectation. This is niṣkāma karma.

> Arjuna, you can choose actions, not reactions. Do not choose action because of the reactions. Do not choose inaction either.— *Bhagavad*
>
> *Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 27 (paraphrased).*

I want to control your actions and reactions. You want to control my actions and reactions. We want to control the world around us, make it predictable. To act is karma. Karma yoga is when we act without seeking control over the outcome.

6.
You and I can empathize

If karma yoga is action without expectation, then what should the motivation of our action be? Plants and animals act in order to find food and security only for themselves and their young ones. Humans can also act to find food and security for others, even strangers. Can this be human motivation? To realize this potential is **dharma**. Dharma is the first word uttered in The Gītā. It is often confused as righteousness. The conflict between dharma and adharma is a point raised by Arjuna in Chapter 1. Empathy is not about controlling others through rules. This is why KṚṢṆA continuously distinguishes between sva-dharma and para-dharma, appropriate conduct of the self and the other.

Dharma is popularly translated as 'righteousness', which involves following punya and shunning Pāpa. It has also come to mean religion, which is essentially about rules that come from a supernatural or superhuman source. So much so that today verses from The Gītā are often translated using the tone of a judge and saviour, similar to that in Western mythologies. It appeals to our yearning for a hero. So, verses 7 and 8 of Chapter 4 are typically translated as, 'Arjuna, in age after age, whenever humanity forgets the righteous way, and functions in unrighteous ways, I manifest to save the good and punish the bad, to restore order in the world.' Such a translation, full of moral outrage, makes no sense to one with a

perspective of infinity, who subscribes to the idea of karma, and so acts without an eye on any particular outcome. So we need to revisit the traditional meanings of dharma.

Hero, Saviour and Avatar

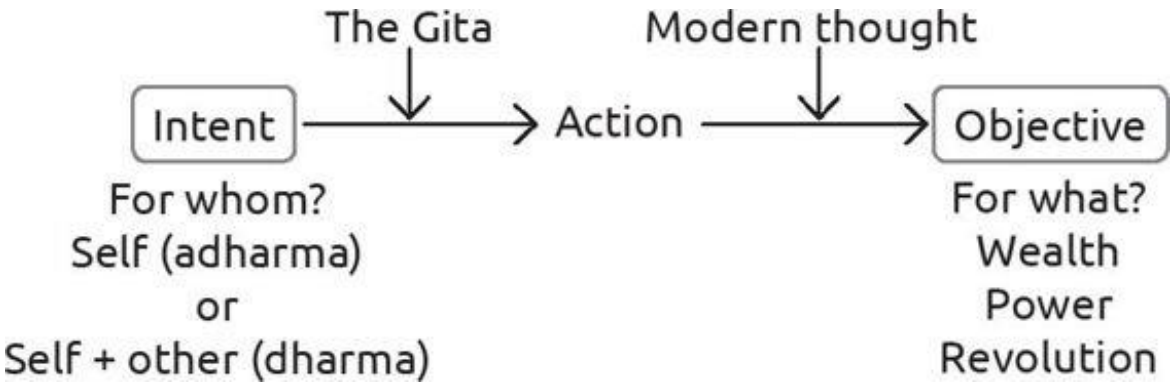
In Jainism, dharma refers to natural movement that stabilizes nature; adharma is artificial stillness that destabilizes nature. **In Buddhism, dharma is the path that helps us accept the transitory nature of all things, including the self**. **In Hinduism, dharma means realizing our potential: changing ourselves into the best we theoretically can be. What is that?**

Humans are the only living creatures who can expand their mind and see the world from another's point of view. This ability enables humans to empathize, to care for the other. To empathize is dharma. Failure to empathize is adharma. With this definition in mind, the above verse can be translated very differently:

> 'Arjuna, in age after age, whenever humanity forgets its potential and functions as it should not, I manifest to inspire those with faith and shake up those without faith, so that humanity never ever forgets what it is capable of.'—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, verses 7 and 8 (paraphrased).*

In any situation, **plants and animals** think only of themselves, their hunger and fear. At best they may think of the hunger and fear of their young ones, or that of their herd and pack. Dogs do think of their masters, but only their masters, no one else. They are **driven by the instinct of self-preservation and self-propagation**. They do not have the wherewithal to function in any other way. **Humans**, however, **can sense other people's, even strangers', hunger and**

fear, and create resources to provide for and protect others. It is the one thing **that makes humans special**.



Role of Empathy in Action

Plants and animals do not help others consciously. They cannot help, because they simply do not have the neurological wherewithal to do so: the **enlarged neo-cortex that only humans have** (we can imagine otherwise though, as we often do in fables or on anecdotal evidence). They do not expect help either. Humans can help and expect to be helped, which comes from the ability to imagine and respond to other people's suffering. **Animals have no choice but to follow their instinct. Humans do have a choice**. When we do exercise our choice, when we value other people's needs alongside our own, we are **following dharma**. **When we stay focussed on our own needs at the cost of others', we are doing adharma**.

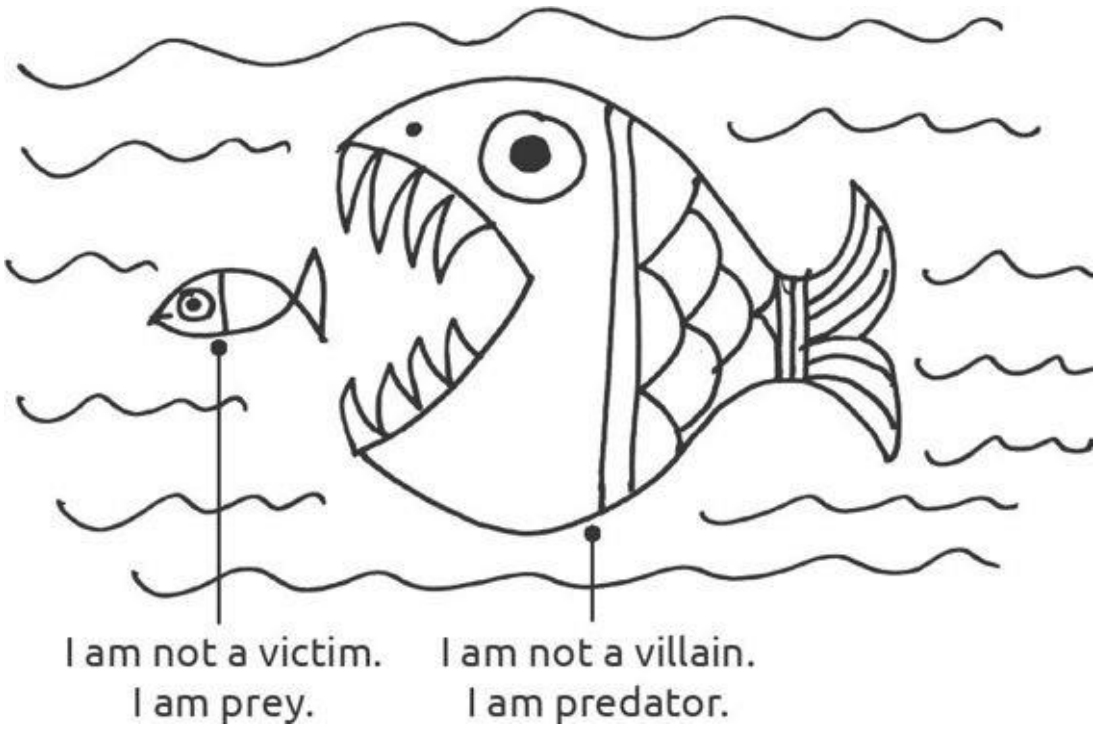
Animal
Instinctively focussed on self-preservation or self-propagation
Human
Imaginatively comes up with resources to also support others

Empathy

In nature, plants and animals use their strength and size and cunning to survive. This is called 'matsya nyāya', literally 'fish justice', which means the same thing as 'jungle law' in English — might is right, survival of the fittest. But words like justice and law are human concepts that we impose on nature to make sense of it. **Justice and law presuppose the existence of a judicial system of judges and**

lawyers; **in nature, there is no such system**. Forces and counter-forces within nature ensure self-regulation. Dominating the weak, **consuming the weak, in order to survive, is the way of animals**. For them, it is instinct, not aspiration. When humans display animal behaviour, such as domination and territoriality, it is adharma, as they are indulging the self.

In the RāMāyāṇa, when Hanuman is crossing the sea, Surasa, a sea monster, blocks his path. Hanuman begs her to let him go as he is on a mission. The sea monster does not understand. Realizing that the creature is unable to appreciate his situation and is blinded by hunger, Hanuman increases his size, forcing Surasa to open her mouth really wide. Hanuman then quickly reduces himself to the size of a fly, darts into Surasa's mouth and slips out before she can snap her wide jaws shut. In this story, Surasa is no villain for blocking Hanuman's path and Hanuman is no hero for outsmarting Surasa. In nature, there are only hungry predators and their food, the prey; **villains and heroes are human perceptions**.



Big Fish and Small Fish

In nature, every creature has to fend for itself. There are no rules in the jungle. Rules exist only in human culture to restrain the strong

and enable the weak. Rāma submits to these cultural rules; Rāvaṇa does not. However, in the Mahābhārata, despite rules, the way of the jungle thrives. In fact, rules are exploited to further domination and territoriality. At Kuru- kśetra, a hundred Kaurava brothers use the might of their eleven armies to twist rules and deny the five Pāṅdava brothers, who have only seven armies, access to Indra-prastha, which is Pāṅdava land and their livelihood. The Pāṅdavas cannot afford to burn another Khandava-prastha, destroy more forests and ecosystems, to create another city simply to accommodate the Kauravas' greed. Besides, there are no guarantees that the Kauravas will not crave that new city too. Withdrawal would mean starvation for the Pāṅdavas, and legitimization of the Kauravas' bullying. The Pāṅdavas act according to dharma—they have no choice but to fight for their survival, as no one empathizes with them, no one even accepts their offer of compromise. The Kauravas, though, practise adharma as they could have empathized, shared, compromised and prevented the war, but they choose not to.

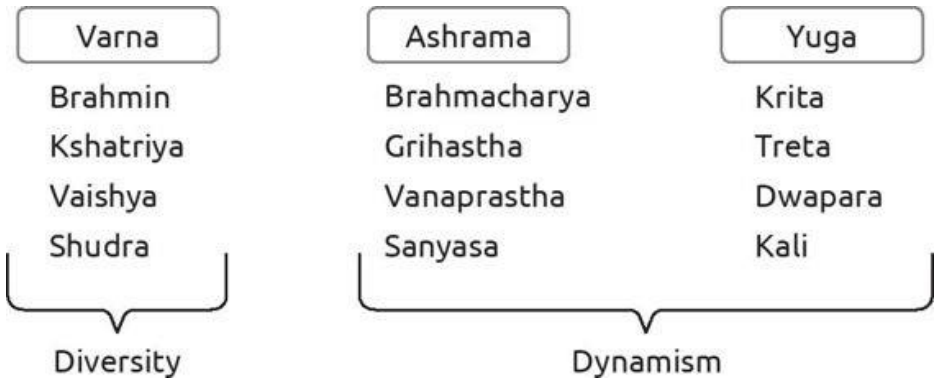
Pandavas
Kauravas
5 Brothers
100 Brothers
7 Armies
11 Armies
Have no other source of livelihood
Can let go or share
Will not let go or share
Willing to compromise for peace
Will not compromise for peace
Kuru-kshetra
Cannot be expected to burn another forest for building another city
Have built no city of their own

Matysa-nyāya in Kuru-kśetra

The Gītā acknowledges the diversity and dynamism of the world. Everyone is born with a different capability (Varṇa): some advise society (Brāhmaṇas), some protect society (Kśatrīyas), some feed society (Vaiśyas) and some serve society (Śudras). Everyone has to go

through different stages of life (ashrama): a student (brahmacharya), a householder (grihastha), a retired person (vanaprastha) and a hermit (sanyasa). The Purāṇas tell us that society is constantly changing; every culture goes through four phases (yuga) moving from innocence (Krita) to maturity (Treta) to struggle (Dvapara) to decay (Kali). How does one uphold dharma in different contexts?

Typically people come up with rules—traditions (riti) and laws (niti), and equate them with dharma. Compliance then becomes dharma and non- compliance adharma. But things are not so simple. What matters more than action is intent, which is not tangible, hence rather invisible.



Diversity and Dynamism

Rules vary with context. In the RāMāyāṇa, which takes place in Treta yuga, Viṣṇū is Rāma, eldest son of a royal family. In the Mahābhārata, which takes place in Dvapara yuga, Viṣṇū is KṚṢṆA, youngest son of a noble family, who is raised by cowherds but who performs as a charioteer. They are expected to behave differently. Rāma is obligated to follow the rules of the family, clan and kingdom, and uphold family honour. KṚṢṆA is under no such obligation. This is why KṚṢṆA tells Arjuna to focus on dharma in his context (sva-dharma) rather than dharma in another's context (para-dharma).

> Arjuna, better to do what you have been asked to do imperfectly than try to do perfectly what others have been asked to. All work has inadequacies; even fire is enveloped by smoke. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, verses 47 and 48 (paraphrased).*

In the RāMāyāṇa Rāma upholds rules, while Rāvaṇa breaks them. In the Mahābhārata Duryodhana upholds rules, while KṚṢṆA breaks them. As eldest sons of their respective clans, Rāma and Duryodhana are obliged to uphold rules. Rāvaṇa, son of a Brāhmaṇa, and KṚṢṆA, raised by cowherds, are under no such obligations. Dharma, however, is upheld only by Rāma and KṚṢṆA, not Rāvaṇa and Duryodhana. Rāma is constantly concerned about his city Ayodhyā's welfare, while Rāvaṇa does not care if his Lanka burns. KṚṢṆA cares for the Pāṅdavas, who happen to be the children of his aunt, but the Kauravas do not care for the Pāṅdavas, who happen to be the children of their uncle. Dharma thus has nothing to with rules or obligations. It has to do with intent and caring for the other, be it your kingdom or your family.

Rāvaṇa argues his case passionately, as do those who fight on the Kaurava side, from Bhisma to Droṇa, Karṇa and Śalya. They justify their actions on grounds of justice, fairness, legitimacy, duty, loyalty, fidelity and commitment. None of them sees the other (para); they are too blinded by the self (aham). **Logic serves as a lawyer to defend their stance**.

But while Rāvaṇa and Duryodhana judge, Rāma and KṚṢṆA never do so. They never complain or justify. Rāma does not justify the mutilation of Surpankha (karma-bija) and silently accepts the end of his happiness that follows (karma-fala), for after that event Sitā is kidnapped, and even after her rescue, the two are separated thanks to gossip. KṚṢṆA does not resist when the killing of the Kauravas (karma-bija) causes their mother Gāṅdhārī to blame and curse KṚṢṆA and his family (karma-fala).

Dharma Versus Riti and Niti

Viṣṇū is not angry with Rāvaṇa or Duryodhana or Duryodhana's commanders, for he can see the roots of their self-obsession and psychological blindness. These come from a sense of isolation and abandonment. They feel they have to fend for themselves and there is no one who can help them; and so, rather than realize their human potential, they regress to their animal nature, focussing on outrunning imagined predators, fending off imagined rivals and consuming imagined prey. When humans behave as animals do, despite the human ability to outgrow animal nature, it is adharma. It evokes compassion in Viṣṇū. For him, the villainy of Rāvaṇa and Duryodhana is viparit-bhakti, reverse love, born of hunger, fear and a yearning for love.

> Arjuna, no one is hurt when you walk this path of humanity; no one is killed; even a little effort helps you fear less.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 40 (paraphrased).*

Dharma is more about empathy than ethics, about intent rather than outcome. I follow dharma when I am concerned about your material, emotional or intellectual hunger. I follow adharma when I focus on my hunger at the cost of yours.

7.
You and I can exchange

Empathy enables exchange. I can satisfy a hunger of yours and you can satisfy a hunger of mine. This refers not just to physical hunger, but psychological hunger as well. This act of mutual feeding informs the **yagna**, the ancient Vedic ritual, which establishes the human ecosystem of mutuality, reciprocity, obligations and expectations that we shall explore in this chapter. Yagna is a key theme in chapters 3 and 4 of The Gītā. In Vedic tradition, technically, the word 'karma' refers to yagna. Karma yoga begins when we acknowledge that we are always part of an exchange.

KṚṢṆA declares that the only action worth doing is yagna. Yagna refers to the Vedic fire ritual, 4,000 years old, nowadays abbreviated to the havan.

> Arjuna, all actions other than yagna entrap us. Yagna alone liberates us. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, Verse 9 (paraphrased).*

The association of yagna with a battle seems strange. However, in The Gītā KṚṢṆA looks upon it as a metaphor, indicative of relationships. To appreciate this, we have to look at the basics of a yagna.

He who initiates the yagna is called the yajamāna. He invokes a deity (Devatā) and offers him food (bhog) exclaiming, 'Svāhā!', meaning, 'This of mine I give you'. He hopes that the invoked deity will give him what he desires (prasad), exclaiming, 'Tathastu!' or 'So be it'. This indicates an exchange.

Yagna

Yagna is a very special form of exchange, where we can give and hope to receive. It is give and get, not give and take. When we take without giving, we become the oppressors. When we give and don't get, we become the oppressed. Feeding the other is dharma. Not expecting reciprocation is niṣkāma karma.

Arjuna, the wise define renunciation as giving up action and detachment as giving up expectation.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, Verse 2 (paraphrased).*

Yagna

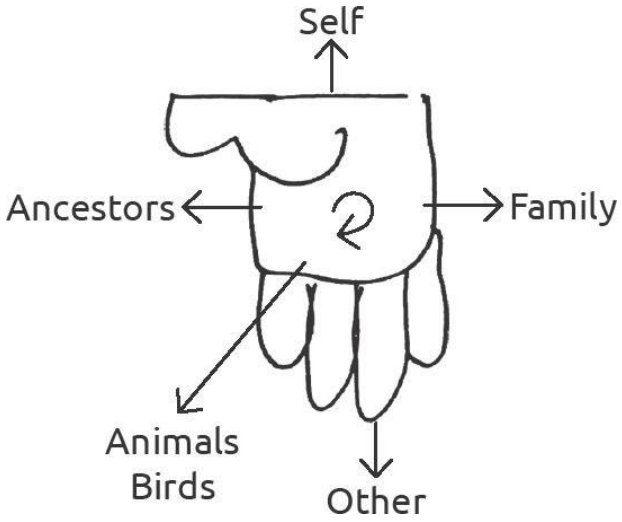
The yagna is mentioned in the first verse (Ṛg) of the first hymn (sukta) of the first book (mandala) of the collection (Saṁhitā) known as Ṛg Veda because it is a reminder of our humanity. No animal feeds another except its own offspring; at best, its pack or herd. Humans can feed everyone around them. Humans can also return the favour. To trade is a very unique human phenomenon. Trading behaviour has been documented in chimpanzees and vampire bats, but nothing on the human scale.

Exchange creates a network of expectations and obligations. Yagna thus is the cornerstone of sanskriti (culture). This idea echoes the sentiment of modern economists who see the market as the foundation of society.

When humans began exchanging, we stepped out of the animal world. From exchange came ideas of mutuality, reciprocity, expectation, obligation, debt and balancing accounts that shaped culture. Yagna is a ritual reminder of this very human ability.

> Arjuna, way back, Brahma created humans through yagna and declared that yagna will satisfy all human needs. Use yagna to satisfy the other and the other will satisfy you. If you take without giving, you are a thief. Those who feed others and eat leftovers are free of all misery. Those who cook for themselves are always unhappy. Humans need food. Food needs rain. Rain needs exchange. Exchange needs action. Exchange began with divinity, that primal spark of humanity. Those who indulge themselves, those who do not repay it backwards, as well as pay it forward, break the chain, are miserable and spread misery. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, verses 10 to 16 (paraphrased).*

In the Kalpa-sutras, which elaborate Vedic household rituals, the yajamāna is advised to perform five yagnas (pancha-yagna) to feed everyone around: the self, the other, family, birds and animals and ancestors. When we do that, the boundary between family and stranger is removed. As the Upanishads say: the whole world becomes family (vasudaivah kutumbakam).



Yagna for Relationships

In most writings, **yagna is translated as 'sacrifice'. This translation came from the European Orientalists of the eighteenth century who never really conducted the ritual or witnessed it**. They probably equated the yagna with the blood sacrifices seen in tribal communities around the world to appease fearsome spirits, or even with the sacrifice of Abraham's son demanded by Abraham's Bhagavān as a mark of love and obedience.

Later, scholars realized that there was another word for sacrifice in the Vedic texts, bali, and that **yagna was clearly a larger concept**. Historians drew attention to the practice of honouring deities (puja) with food, flowers, incense and lamps, that became popular in Puranic times. This had its roots in the Vedic practice of pouring ghee into fire. Both are acts of invocation and libation. Yagna came to be seen as an earlier form of puja. So yagna was then translated as 'worship'.

But the Purāṇas show yagna in a very different light. In the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata, kings perform yagna to get children. Mantras chanted yield instant results: a Bhagavān is obliged to give a woman a child, or turn an ordinary arrow into a deadly missile. **Yagna thus assumes expectation and obligation, giving in order to get. Yagna is clearly an exchange**.

The word ‘exchange’ is rarely used to explain yagna. It is problematic. It lacks nobility. We have learned to valourize sacrifice, where there is giving without getting. We even celebrate worship, where getting is a surprise, a bonus, not the outcome of any expectation. This, despite the fact that the last hymn of every yagna and puja is always the chant of expected outcomes (fala-stuti). Perhaps we have been conditioned to be ashamed of human yearnings, maybe by mendicants of the Buddhist, Jain and Hindu orders who chose to renounce the world. Perhaps our preference for socialism in the post-Independence era made us frown upon the idea of exchange, as it reeks of a trader mentality. How can we trade with the divine?

By calling the battle at Kuru-kśetra a yagna, KṚṢṆA indicates that Arjuna is part of an exchange. Either he is the yajamāna who will please his brothers, or he is the Devatā who has to repay the debt he owes his brothers. The Pāṅdavas depend on him, and he is indebted to the Pāṅdavas. To deny these dependencies, these expectations and obligations, is to deny humanity.

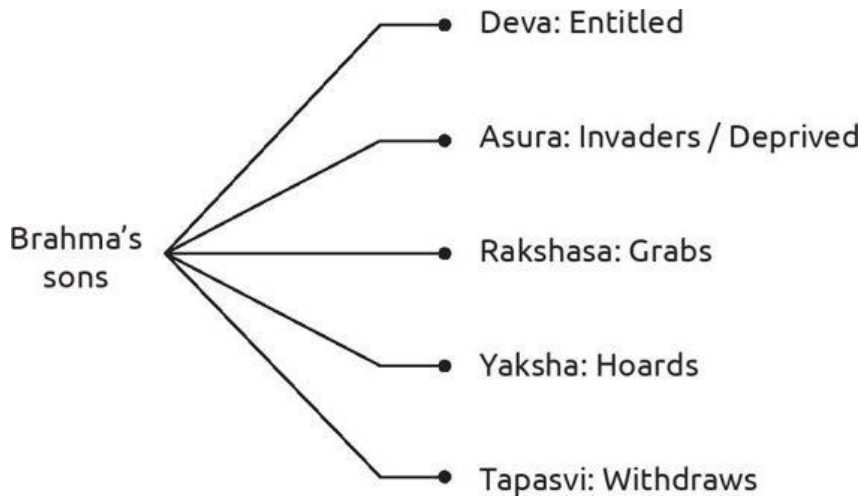
The monastic order rejected the yagna. In essence, they rejected the other. **For yagna is all about paying cognizance to the hunger of the other. The other is both an individual (para) as well as the collective (param). Yagna is about the relationship between the individual (aham) and the other (para/param) through exchange**.

In the Śiva Purāṇa, when the hermit Śiva beheads Daksha and destroys his yagna, all the Bhagavāns beg him to give life back to the yajamāna and restore the yagna, for without it they will starve. Thus, the Devatās depend on the yajamāna as much as the yajamāna depends on the Devatās. There is interdependence at play here.

> Arjuna, those who offer food to the Bhagavāns and survive on the leftovers find brahmana. Not those who offer nothing. Different yagnas are thus laid at the mouth of the brahmana. It all begins with choosing an action. Rather than choose to give up the world, choose to understand the brahmana, which demands

action, hence yagna. Thus, informed by the wise, you will see all beings in yourself, and all beings as part of me. There will be no confusion.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, verses 26 to 35 (paraphrased).*

In Puranic lore, he who gives upon getting is a deva; he who seeks retrieval of what he thinks has been stolen is an asura; he who grabs, takes without giving, is a rakshasa; he who hoards is a yaksha! He who does not participate in the yagna, does not give or want to get, is a shramana or tapasvi, the hermit, much feared in the Purāṇas as the cause of drought, hence starvation. Within us is the yajamāna, the Devatā, the asura, the rakshasa, the yaksha and the shramana. They manifest in different interactions.



Brahma's Sons

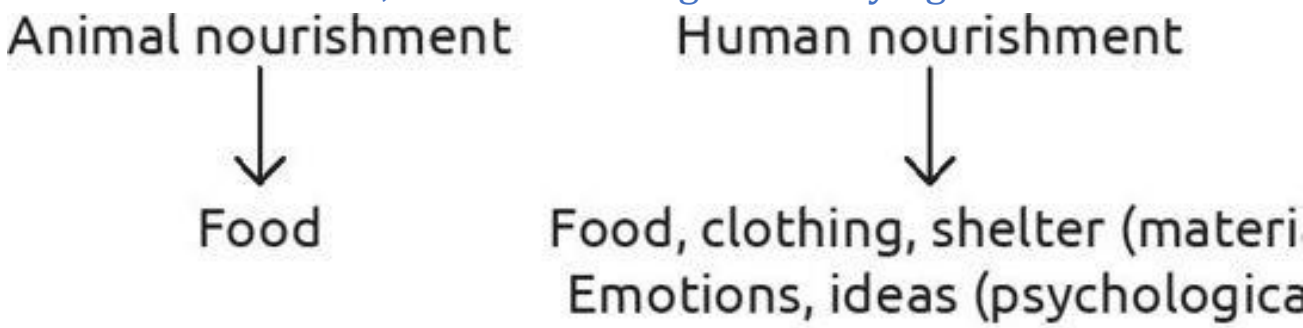
Once, as Śiva was passing by a yagna-Śāḷā, where a yagna was being conducted, the wives of the yajamānas, the yagna-patnis, ran after him, begging him to satisfy them. The yajamānas got upset and created, out of the yagna, a whole bunch of monsters. Śiva destroyed all the monsters and then began to dance. He used various gestures of his hands and feet to convey the wisdom of the yagna that escaped the yajamānas, that the yagna existed to satisfy the yearnings of those around them, not to create monsters to defend themselves.

A similar story is found in the Bhagavat Purāṇa, where KṚṢṆA, while tending to his cows, comes upon a few yajamānas performing yagna and asks them for food. They ignore him. So he goes to their

wives and the yagna-patnis feed him all the offerings they had prepared for the yagna. The yajamānas are furious but then realize that their wives look content, while they feel angry and frustrated. The yagna had yielded results for their wives, not them, for the yagna-patnis had fed the hungry and discovered the true meaning of the yagna.

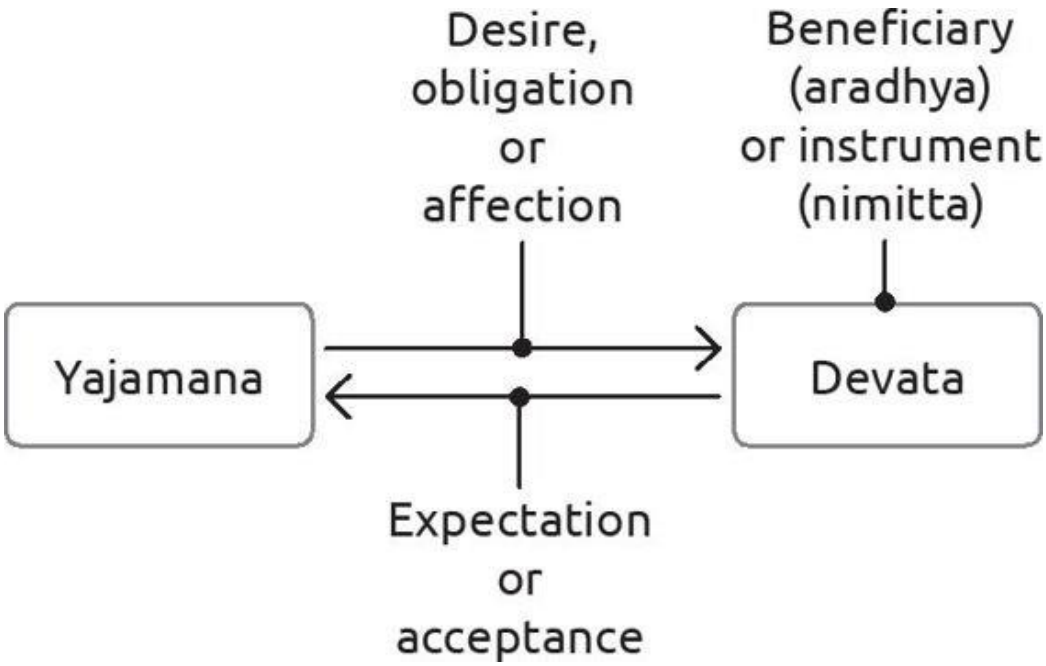
> Arjuna, like a well surrounded by water, hymns and rituals are of no value to the one who has understood the meaning. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 46 (paraphrased).*

Human hunger is not just about food. We seek emotional and intellectual nourishment too. We seek meaning, Vālīdation, significance, value, purpose, power and understanding. We seek ideas about wealth, power, relationships and existence. We seek entertainment. We seek food to liberate us from the fear of the predator, security to liberate us from the fear of the prey and meaning to liberate us from the fear of inVālīdation. This transforms every meeting into an exchange. Lovemaking is yagna. Child-bearing is yagna. Child-rearing is yagna. Feeding is yagna. Teaching is yagna. Service is yagna. War is also yagna. Exchange can be used to satisfy our desires, or repay our debts. It can entrap us, or liberate us. It depends not on the action, but on the thought underlying the action.



Different Types of Yagna Food

A wish (sankalpa) always precedes a yagna. It is about asking for whom are we performing the action: for the benefit of the self (aham) or the benefit of the other (para)? Who is the beneficiary (aradhya)? And who is merely the instrument (nimitta)? In niṣkāma karma, the Devatā is the aradhya and the yajamāna is the nimitta.



Approach to Exchange

In the RāMāyāṇa, disruption happens because characters act for their own pleasure at the cost of others and resolution follows when Viṣṇū acts for the pleasure of others, not his own. It is Dasharatha's desire for sons, Kaikeyi's desire for the kingdom, Surpanakha's desire for pleasure and Rāvaṇa's desire for domination that cause disruption. Rāma works not for his personal happiness, but the happiness of Ayodhyā. In the Mahābhārata, it is Shantanu's desire for a young wife, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's desire for the throne and Yudhishtira's desire not to lose a gamble that causes disruption. KṚṢṆA works not for his personal happiness, but for the happiness of the Kurus.

KṚṢṆA asks Arjuna to fight the war not for his own sake but for the sake of others. He has to consider himself merely the instrument, for the karma-bija of the war has already been sown and the karma-fala of carnage is inevitable.

> Arjuna, I am time that destroys worlds. Even without you, these warriors are doomed to die. So arise and fight; destroy your opponents and claim your success. It is I who has already killed them. Make yourself merely my instrument.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 11, verses 32 and 33 (paraphrased).*

To do yagna is to recognize that we live in a sea of assumed expectations and obligations. You and I can hoard, grab, give in order to get, get before giving or simply withdraw from the exchange. We can act out of desire, duty or care. We can choose to expect or control outcome, or not.

8.
You and I withdraw in fear

What stops us from empathizing and exchanging? What makes us want to control the other, or simply withdraw, find peace in the isolation of the cave? The process of discovering the source of disconnection is called **yoga**, though the word yoga itself means 'to connect'. It involves moving through the many containers that constitute deha in order to discover dehi. KṚṢṆA starts speaking of yoga in Chapter 5 of The Gītā, elaborating it further in Chapter 6. Yoga is what we will explore in this chapter. With this, we move from the outer social world to the inner psychological world, from karma yoga to bhakti yoga.

Each of the eighteen chapters of The Gītā is titled 'yoga'. These are then bunched together to give us three types of yoga: behavioural (karma), emotional (bhakti) and intellectual or cognitive (gyāna). So what does the word 'yoga' exactly mean?

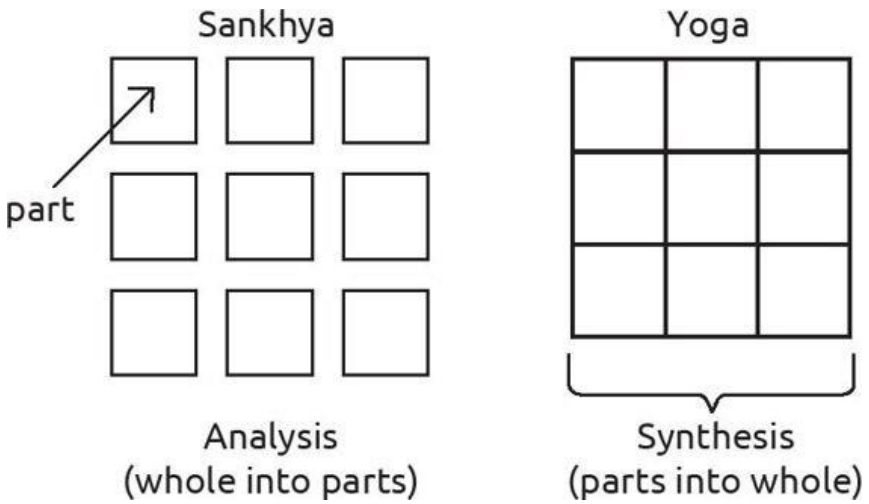
Colloquially, Indians use the word 'jog' for yoga. In astrology, jog means alignment of the stars that results in favourable conditions for an activity. From jog comes the word 'jogadu', the resourceful individual, a word typically used in the eastern parts of India for one who is able to create alignment and connections in a world full of misalignment and disconnections. The word 'jogadu' has given rise to

the words ‘jugad’ and ‘jugadu’ in the northern parts of India, where it means improvisation and even by-passing the system. Sadly, today, jugad is used in a negative sense, for it is practised for the self at the cost of the other, in the spirit of adharma, not dharma.

The word ‘yoga’ has its roots in the sound ‘yuj’ which means to yoke, like a horse to a chariot. The word ‘vi-yoga’ refers to disconnection or separation. Thus, ‘yoga’ has something to with binding things together, or connecting things.

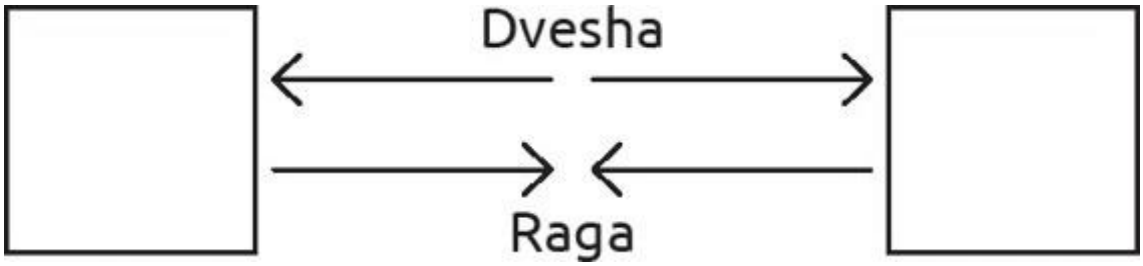
Traditionally, yoga has been used as a complement to sāṅkhya. Sāṅkhya means enumeration and refers to analysis, the tendency to break things down into their constituent parts. Yoga is its complement and refers to synthesis, the tendency to bind parts to establish a composite whole. In art, sāṅkhya is visualized as an axe (parashu), used to slice things into parts, while yoga is visualized as a string (pasha), used to tie things together. Ganesha, the scribe of the Mahābhārata—and hence The Gītā—holds these symbols in his hands to remind all of these two techniques of enquiry. KṚṢṆA uses both sāṅkhya and yoga to solve Arjuna’s problem. He establishes boundaries using sāṅkhya and then dissolves them all using yoga.

> Arjuna, practise yoga with conviction and without dismay, for it will connect you with that from which you are disconnected, and unhook you from your sorrow. *—Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, Verse 23 (paraphrased).*



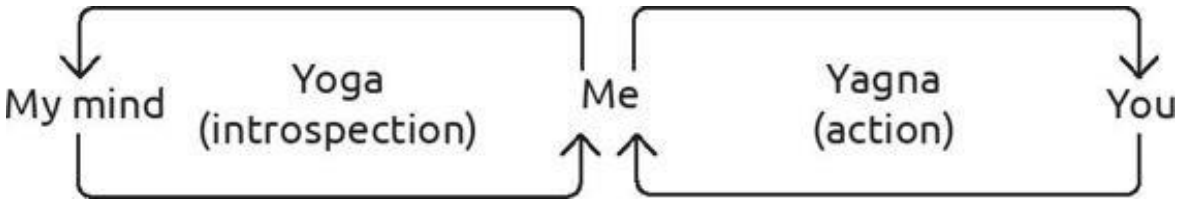
Analysis and Synthesis

Nature is full of discrete units: planets, stars, rocks, rivers, plants, animals and humans. These units are naturally drawn together or pulled apart by certain forces of attraction or repulsion. In the physical world, these forces have been observed at inter-planetary as well as sub-atomic levels. In the biological world, they manifest as animals seeking opportunity, such as food and mates, and shunning threats, such as rivals and predators. This attraction (raga) and repulsion (dvesha) is part of life.



Raga–Dvesha

Yoga enables us to be aware of these natural forces of attraction and repulsion, and not be swept away by them. KṚṢṆA equates the senses to cows (indriya-go-chara) that graze on the pasture made of various kinds of stimuli. Yoga turns our mind into the cowherd who determines what the senses should or should not graze upon. Thus, yoga has much to do with the mind, and it complements yagna that has much to do with society. Yagna is the outer journey, while yoga is the inner journey that Arjuna has to undertake.

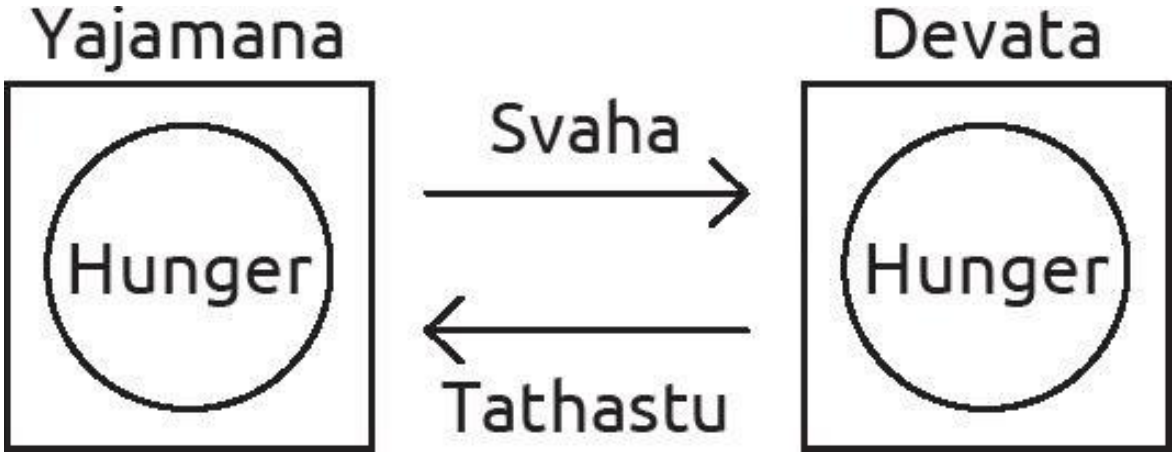


Yoga and Yagna

Arjuna feels that if he withdraws from the battle, all problems will be resolved and there will be peace. However, not fighting a war does not tackle the underlying hunger and fear. It simply denies and suppresses the hunger and fear and the consequent rage, which then ends up festering secretly as people 'pretend', awaiting to explode more intensely at a later date. Outer peace does not guarantee inner

peace. Further, it does not take into consideration the other's thoughts and feelings. Arjuna's desire for peace, howsoever noble, may not be shared by Bhima or Duryodhana, who are ready for war. Forcing his noble view on them would be judgement, devoid of empathy, hence adharma. Arjuna may not want to do yagna, but he cannot stop others from doing so. Our decision to act or not act cannot be insensitive to the feelings of those around us. Hence, any discussion on yagna is complemented with discussions on yoga. While yagna focusses on tangible giving and getting, yoga focusses on discovering intangible thoughts and emotions of the yajamāna as well as the Devatā, the boundaries that we create and use to include some as family and exclude others as enemy.

> Arjuna, your mind is your friend and your enemy. If you control the mind, it is your friend. If your mind controls you, it is your enemy.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, verses 5 and 6 (paraphrased).*



Mind of the Yajamāna and the Devatā

The value of the mind slowly amplifies as The Gītā progresses. In Chapter 3 of The Gītā, Arjuna asks **whether KṚṢṆA values knowledge over action**. KṚṢṆA replies that he values *informed* action. In Chapter 5 of The Gītā, Arjuna asks if KṚṢṆA **values action over renunciation**. KṚṢṆA replies that he values ***detached* action**. Informing the mind about the exchange and detaching action from the expectation of results demand that Arjuna take an inner journey.

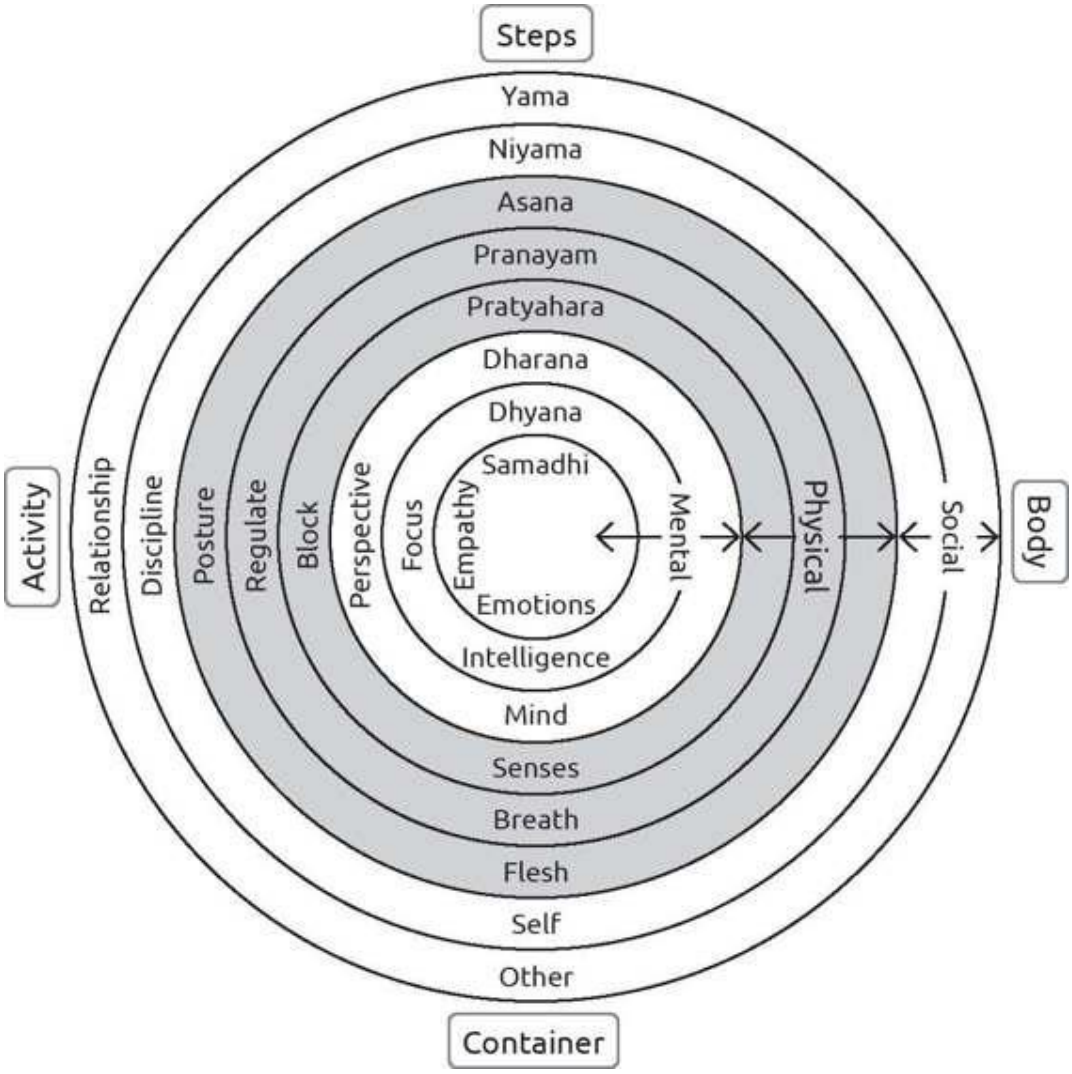
> Arjuna, the exchange of knowledge is greater than the exchange of things for ultimately all exchange culminates in the mind. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, Verse 33 (paraphrased).*

KṚṢṆA introduces yoga as an inner yagna, where we are our own yajamāna and Devatā, our own beneficiary and instrument. We choose our stimulus. We choose our response. Here, the fire is not in the altar outside, but can be our body, our senses, our mind, even our breath and our digestive fire.

> Arjuna, there is yagna everywhere, where offerings are made to various fires. Worldly stimuli can be offered to the sensory fires. The sensory experience can be offered to the mental fire. The mental understanding can be offered to the wisdom fire. Breath is offered to the fire of life, as is food. Fasting is offered to the fire of restraint. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, verses 26 to 28 (paraphrased).*

Patañjalī, in his Yoga-sutra, written around the time of The Gītā, defines yoga as stopping the rippling and twisting of the mind (chitta-vritti-nirodha) caused by various experiences and memories that result in disconnection. He gives an eight-step process to stop the ripples and untwist the mind, so as to restore connection. With each step we move inwards through the containers that constitute the body.

With yama, we limit social engagements by not indulging in sex, violence, falsehood, theft and greed. Then, **with niyama, we discipline ourselves by practising cleanliness**, **contentment**, **austerity**, **reflection** and having **faith in divinity**. Third comes **asana**, where we activate the body using various postures. Fourth is **prāṇāyama**, through which we regulate the breath. With **pratyāhāra**, we withdraw from sensory inputs. With **dhāraṇā**, we become **aware of the big picture and gain perspective**. With **dhyāna**, we become **attentive and focussed**. With samādhī, we go further within, experience our emotions and discover fear!



Patañjalī's Yoga

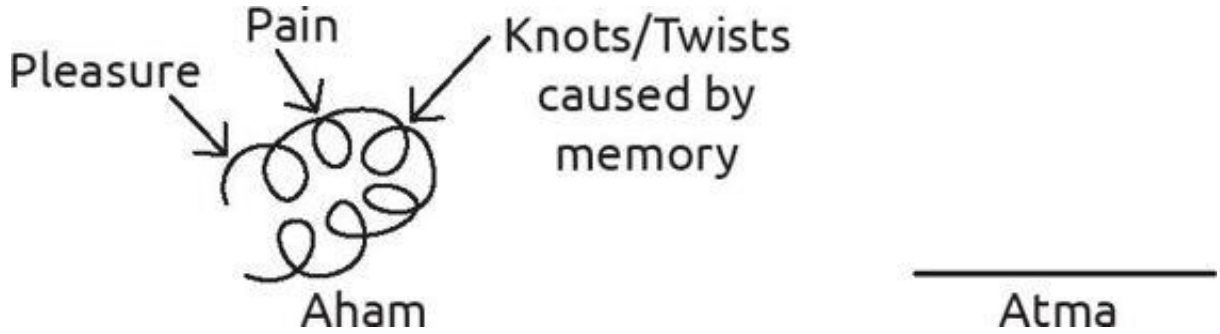
Fear (bhaya) is a neuro-biological fact. It is the first emotion that manifests with the arrival of life. It is a critical emotion, essential in the struggle for life. For it evokes hunger (kshudhā) and makes the organism seek food (bhoga) to nourish itself.

Fear of death by starvation makes trees grow, seek out and grab sunlight as well as water and nutrients from the soil, so that they can nourish themselves. This same fear makes animals wander endlessly in search of pasture and prey, and form packs that collaborate to increase the chances of finding food. Fear of being killed makes the prey shun the predator, and form herds to increase the chances of survival. Then there is the fear of losing food to a rival that makes animals compete. Fear of dying also creates the restless urge to undertake extra efforts to find a mate, reproduce and risk death to

raise an offspring, so at least a part of the creature outlives death. In humans, the **fear is amplified by imagination**. We can imagine hunger, our hunger and the hunger of those around us, current and future hunger, and so our **quest for food is insatiable**. We can imagine predators and so feel insecure all the time. This amplified fear goads human imagination to invent various physical and social instruments to create excess food, distribute and secure it; and themselves.

The greatest human fear is Vālīdation. We seek meaning (artha): **who are we?** What is **our role** in the world? Surely we are not just animals — predator, prey, rival or mate? This fear gives rise to the notion of property and to hierarchies in society. Out of fear, we do not share. Due to fear, we fight over property.

Fear crumples our mind (chitta), knots it, twists it, creates ripples and waves and eventually wrinkles our mind. These wrinkles in the mind are called impressions (saṁskāras). They appeared with the first experience of fear in the first living organisms. The experience of all feeders and food, every plant and animal, has been stacked up over millions of years. The crumpling has been intensified by imagination (manas). It causes disconnection. The frightened, hence crumpled, hence disconnected, mind is referred to as aham. The mind that is not crumpled, hence connected, is referred to as ātmā. Yoga is about un- crumpling and reconnecting, moving from aham to ātmā.



Aham to Ātmā

The Gītā reveals a familiarity with all the practices referred to in the Yoga- sutra. KṚṢṆA speaks of using the breath to make the journey from the outside to the inside.

> Arjuna, ignore the onslaught of external stimuli and focus between your eyebrows, regulating inhalation and exhalation at the nostrils, to liberate yourself from fear, desire and anger, and discover me within you, I who receive and consume every offering of your yagnas.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 5, verses 27 to 29 (paraphrased).*

There is reference to meditation in The Gītā: sitting still and calming the mind until one's breath is natural and rhythmic.

> Arjuna, sit still on a mat that is neither too high nor too low. Your head, neck and back aligned, still your senses, focus your mind, gazing at the nose-tip.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, verses 11 to 13 (paraphrased).*

The point is to make one's way through the turbulence of the mind and discover the tranquillity beyond.

> Arjuna, use your mind to ignore sensory stimuli, outgrow that desire, disconnect from intelligent arguments and ideas, rein in the restless fickle wandering emotions, expand your mind and discover the tranquillity within. —*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, verses 24 to 27 (paraphrased).*

And having once realized the fear within, the yogi is able to see the fear without, in others around, in individuals as well as in the collective, for he is connected.

> Arjuna, those connected see everything equally, for they discover me everywhere, in everyone and everything. They always see me, and I see them. They always establish me everywhere. I am always established in them.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, verses 29 to 31 (paraphrased).*

This is where The Gītā departs from the Yoga-sutra. While the Yoga-sutra speaks of samādhī as complete withdrawal from the material world, KṚṢṆA's Gītā speaks of samādhī very differently, as the ability to see the world with perfect equanimity, without judgement.

> Arjuna, one who has attained samādhī is not disturbed by unhappiness, nor does he crave happiness. He is not consumed by craving, fear or anger. He is at peace in pleasant and unpleasant circumstances. He is content in wisdom.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, verses 55 to 56 (paraphrased).*

This divergence from the Yoga-sutra is not surprising, as mythological tales inform us that Patañjalī was a serpent who overheard Śiva revealing the secret of yoga to Shakti. Śiva is a hermit. His path is suitable for the tapasvi who does not wish to engage with the world. KṚṢṆA speaks to the yajamāna, the householder, and the whole point of yoga is to facilitate engagement with the world. If the tapasvi is focussed on the inner journey, and if the yajamāna is focussed on the outer journey, then the yogi takes the inner journey in order to be better at the outer journey.

Arjuna, the yogi is far superior to a hermit who withdraws from the world, to a scholar who understands everything but does nothing, or a householder who does everything without understanding.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, Verse 46 (paraphrased).*

Patañjalī

Yoga brings awareness and attention to fear. By recognizing the reality of his own fears, the yogi is able to appreciate the fears of those around him. He observes why he withdraws and why those around him withdraw. He does not seek to amplify fear by trying to control people. He works towards comforting them, enabling them to outgrow their fear. Thus is born empathy and the ability to let go. The yajamāna performs niṣkāma karma.

A yogi looks within to appreciate the mind that occupies the body, the thoughts that occupy the mind, the fears that occupy the thoughts, the opportunities and threats that occupy the fears, and the fears of others that occupy those opportunities and those threats.

9.
You and I heSitāte to trust

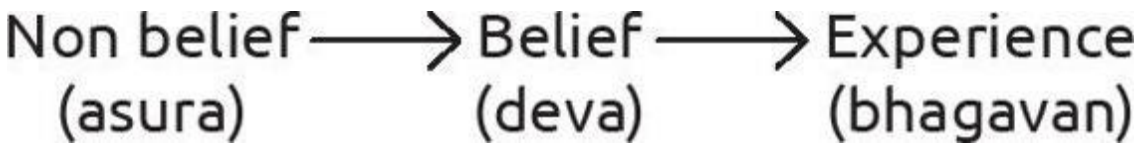
Connecting with the other is not easy, especially when we look upon each other as predator or prey, rival or mate. In such a situation we trust no one but ourselves, as animals tend to do. Or we trust the other only in situations of extreme helplessness, as only humans can. Thus, we become **asuras** and **devas**. KṚṢṆA discusses the difference between the two in Chapter 16 of The Gītā, but we discuss it much earlier in *My Gītā* as we need to understand 'Bhagavāns' before we plunge into conversations about 'Bhagavān'. These beings are not 'out there' in the world, but very much 'in here' in our minds.

The words 'deva' and 'asura' refer to divinities in the Veda, and are roughly translated as Bhagavāns and demons, but KṚṢṆA uses them differently. A deva is one who accepts the reality of ātmā; an asura does not. Thus, KṚṢṆA sees devas and asuras not in supernatural terms or as inherently good or evil, but as people who value the dehi and those who don't, respectively. The asuras are trapped by the literal and the measurable, while the devas appreciate the metaphorical and the non-measurable. Those who do not look beyond the body and material reality, says KṚṢṆA, have no hope of freedom, despite any material accomplishments.

> Arjuna, those who think as devas do are eventually liberated and those who think as asuras do are forever trapped. Fear not, you

think like a deva.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 16, Verse 5 (paraphrased).*

While asuras are equated with non-believers (nastikas) and devas with believers (astika), the split is not so simple. Devas may believe, but do they experience?



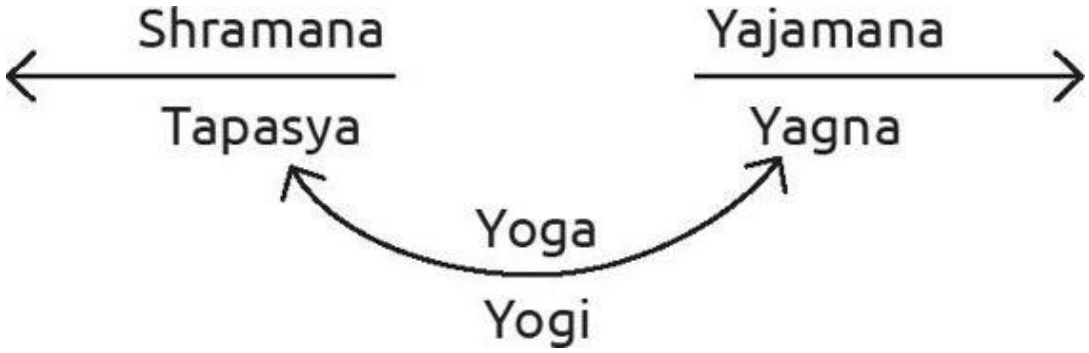
Non-Belief, Belief, Experience

The Gītā presents ātmā as a fact, hence in Chapter 17, Verse 23, the phrase 'om tat sat' is used, which roughly translates as 'that which is forever true'. It is the closest we get to the definitive article 'the' in Sanskrit. This fact, however, can never be measured, therefore from a scientific point of view it can never be proven. It can, however, be experienced (anu-bhāva). Believing is a cognitive process, an acceptance of a conceptual truth. Experience is an emotional process, the journey from the head to the heart. To enable anu-bhāva, one has to simultaneously perform the inner journey of yoga and the outer journey of yagna.

Arjuna, those who cleanse themselves with contemplation and meditation discover me, embrace me, find shelter in me and are liberated from yearning, fear and anger.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, Verse 10 (paraphrased).*

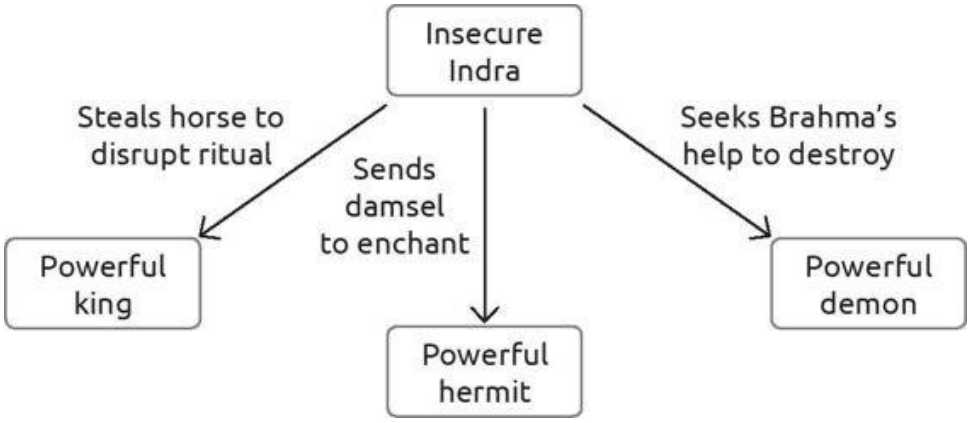
Two thousand years ago, hermits (shramanas) popularized the practice of yoga, but they did not care so much for the outer journey of yagna. They valued the inner fire of the mind (tapa), not the outer fire (agni) of the altar. While the word tapasya is used interchangeably with yoga, tapasya refers to the inner journey, while yoga refers to the inner journey that eventually leads to an outer journey. The hermits were tapasvis, who valued meditation and contemplation, not exchange. They can thus be differentiated from the yogis, who valued meditation and contemplation as well as exchange. Hermits valued withdrawal over engagement, celibacy over marriage,

isolation over union and zero (Śuṅya) over infinity (ananta). In other words, hermits caused a rupture between the inner and outer journeys.



Rupture of the Inner and Outer Journey

In the Purāṇas, this rupture is made explicit. The devas prefer yagna but not tapasya. The asuras prefer tapasya but not yagna. Both are the children of Brahma. Indra, leader of the devas, who is not committed to the inner journey, is eternally insecure: he fears those who perform yagna and tapasya, and considers them as rivals. So he disrupts the yagna of kings by stealing their horses. He sends damsels known as apsaras to enchant sages immersed in tapasya and irritates them by seducing their neglected wives. Asuras, on the other hand, are visualized as performing tapasya and obtaining, from Brahma, many powers that overpower Indra. Thus, devas are portrayed as entitled, insecure beings while asuras are portrayed as deprived, angry beings. Though half-brothers, these sons of Brahma do not like each other: the devas fear the asuras and the asuras hate the devas.



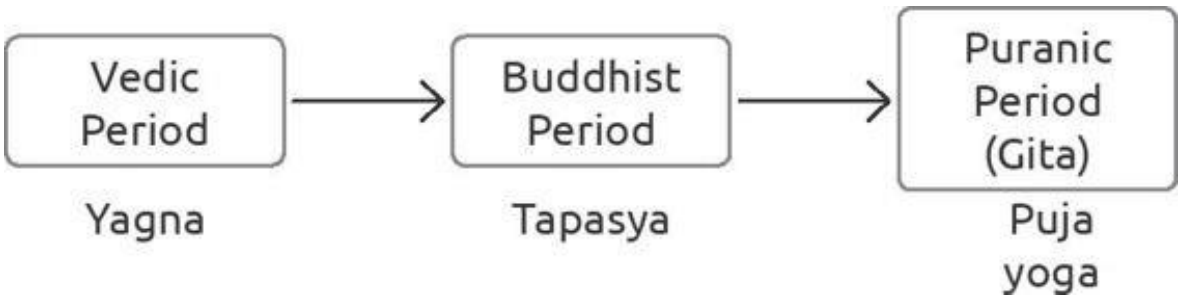
Stealing Horses, Seeking Brahma's Help and Sending Damsels

In the Vedas, the devas and asuras are celestial beings. But in the Purāṇas, they are clearly rivals. The **Europeans identified asuras first as Titans, in line with Greek mythology**, and **later as demons, in line with Abrahamic mythology**. This **causes great confusion**, as the **asuras are neither 'old Gods nor 'forces of evil'**. Both old Gods and forces of evil are unwanted and need to be excluded, while **in the Purāṇas, both are needed to churn the ocean of milk, and draw out its treasures**. Since the devas were visualized as being surrounded by affluence and abundance in Svarga, they were naturally preferred over the asuras as the devas had a lot that they could give, if made happy, while the asuras had nothing.

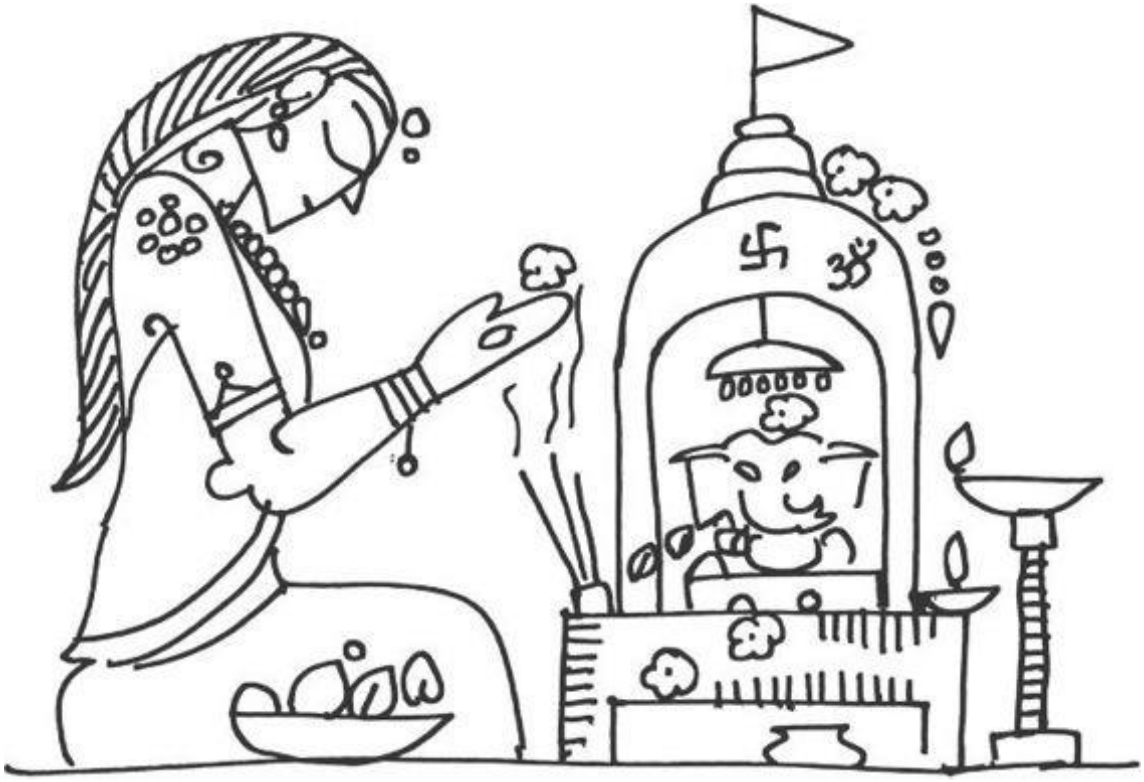
The visualization of asuras either as villains, anti-heroes or even wronged heroes persists even today amongst writers on mythology, who see asuras as old tribal units overrun, even enslaved and demonized, by yagna-performing Vedic people. Asuras are even seen as embodiments of our negative impulses and devas as personifying positive impulses. We overlook the fact that in popular Hinduism neither devas nor asuras are given the same status as ishwara or Bhagavān. We need to see devas and asuras as our emotions that prevent us from completing the outer and inner journeys.

Puranic stories typically begin with Indra not paying attention to the yagna while an asura is deep in tapasya. Indra's power thus wanes while the asura's power waxes. The asura is able to invoke Brahma and get boons from him, using which he attacks, defeats and drives the devas out of their paradise, Svarga. Dispossessed, Indra and the devas go to Brahma, not for boons but for help. Brahma then directs them either to Śiva , Viṣṇū or the Bhagavāndess, who form the foundation of the three major theistic schools of Hinduism.

In many ways, these stories echo the history of Indian thought: the decline of the yagna rituals of Vedic times, the rising popularity of monastic orders that practise tapasya, and eventually the triumph of theistic traditions. They also reflect the rise of the ritual known as 'puja' that forces the devotee to look at the divinity outside himself through images in the other, thus enabling the yoga of the self with the world around.



Rediscovery of Ātmā



Puja

It is significant to note that the asuras seek Brahma's boons and the devas seek Brahma's help. The asuras are not interested in Brahma; only in his possessions. They perform tapasya not to attain wisdom that takes away insecurity, but to simply acquire powers known as siddhis. The devas are interested in Brahma and are directed to Śiva , Viṣṇū and the Bhagavāndess, a calling for the inner journey that grants wisdom, hence takes away insecurity. But the devas do not complete this inner journey.

As the Purāṇas remind us repeatedly, after either of the Bhagavāns or the Bhagavāndess vanquishes the asura and Indra gets

back his paradise, he goes back to his old ways, feeling entitled and finding joy in material things, getting insecure with yajamānas who do too much yagna and tapasvis who do too much tapasya, unable to enjoy his prosperity as he feels his paradise is under siege, much like successful people in the world today, who think of Bhagavān only in bad times and forget about Bhagavān in good times. For them Bhagavān is all about their own fortune, not everybody's fortune. For them there is no Bhagavān within who enables the world without.

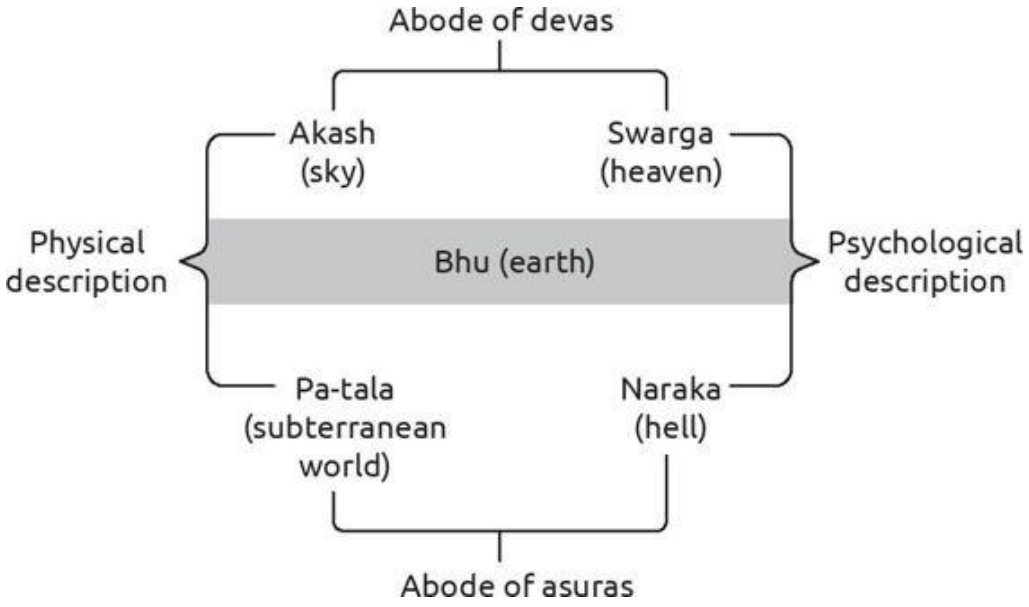
The asura is one who is striving for success. The deva is one who is, or has been, successful. A determination to be successful drives the asura to do tapasya. Fear of losing what they have or fear of never getting back what they lost makes the devas seek Brahma. The asura does not believe that anyone will help him. The deva believes that Bhagavān exists only to help him while he does not exist to help anyone. In other words, the asura does not believe in ātmā whereas the deva believes in param-ātmā, but has yet to realize jiva-ātmā, the human potential.

The description of the condition of the asuras in The Gītā is brutal and resonates with what we see in the world around us, where great value is placed on what you achieve and what you possess.

> Arjuna, asuras will say 'This I have gained, that desire of mine I have satisfied, that enemy of mine I have destroyed, by any means available; I am the master, the enjoyer, the successful, the strong, the happy; I am rich and I will donate; there is none like me.' Thus ensnared in his own net, addicted to satisfying his insatiable desire, he tumbles into a hell of conceit and envy and rage; born again and again in similar wombs; trapped in the same context. Seeking more, getting angry when he does not get what he seeks and seeking more when he gets what he seeks, he is unable to escape the darkness and find the light of happiness.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 16, verses 12 to 22 (paraphrased).*

The description above seems like judgement, or a wish, but is in fact observation: the inevitable outcome of what happens when we

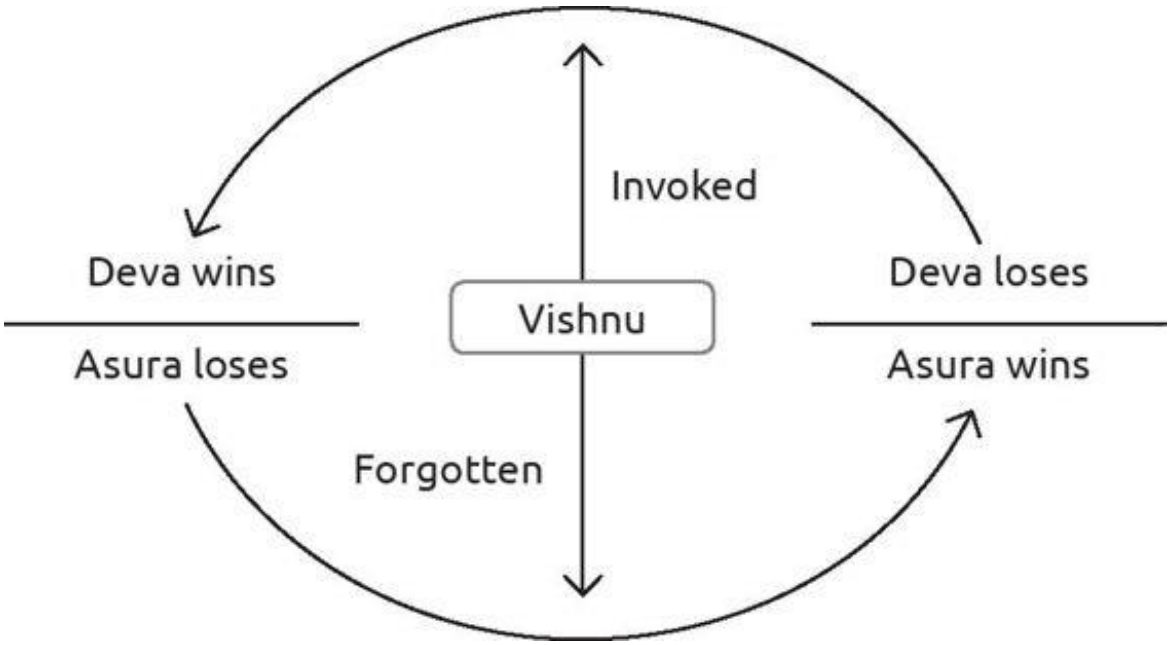
believe material things will bring us satisfaction, when we see humans as bodies who perform and accumulate, when we see the world in technocratic terms, devoid of meaning and a larger narrative. We expect things to give us pleasure but instead they fuel more yearnings, thus creating addiction, which fuels greed. We want more and more, and feel angry when we don't get what we desire.



Svarga, Pā-tāla and Naraka

In the Purāṇas, the residence of the asuras is called pa-tala, the subterranean realm; this is where they belong, just as the devas belong in the celestial realm, the sky above. But in The Gītā, the residence of the asuras is called naraka, or hell. Pā-tāla is a physical description but naraka is a psychological description: lack of faith results in hopelessness and rage and hence creates hell.

Victory over the devas does not bring the asuras satisfaction. Victory over the asuras does not provide enlightenment to the devas. Both are trapped in a merry-go-round, unable to break free. Yet, Viṣṇū ascribes greater value to the devas over the asuras, for the former look beyond the material, for some time at least. Both the Pāṅdavas and the Kauravas are fighting over property, but at least Arjuna is listening to possibilities beyond.



Cycle of Victories and Defeats

Yagna of the devas is good, as it forces us to look at the param-ātmā outside. Tapasya of the asuras is good, as it makes us discover the jiva-ātmā inside. But we need the two to inform each other. Only yagna is action without understanding. Only tapasya is understanding without action. When understanding impacts action and action impacts understanding, then it is yoga.

> Arjuna, yoga will enable you to perform action without expectation, and look upon success and failure equally. Action focussed on intent is better than action focussed on outcome. Such action liberates you from all dualities, so improve your skills with yoga.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, verses 48 to 50 (paraphrased).*

We all ride waves of fortune and misfortune. If you and I believe we alone control the waves, then we are asuras. If you and I feel entitled in fortune and remember Bhagavān only in misfortune or in fear of misfortune, then we are devas. We are not yet in touch with the ātmā within and without.

10.
You and I have potential

We mistrust fellow humans and so yearn for something beyond humanity, someone who comforts us, indulges our hungers, our insecurities and our inadequacies, without judgement. And so, two thousand years ago, The Gītā introduced Hinduism to the concept of **Bhagavān** that consolidates and personifies earlier, rather abstract, notions of divinity, such as brahmana, puruśa and ātmā. This theme, elaborated from chapters 7 to 12 of The Gītā, is what makes the Bhagavad Gītā remarkable, challenging the ritual nature of the Vedas, the intellectual nature of the Upanishads and acknowledging the role of emotions in our life. We are not rational creatures who feel; we are emotional creatures who rationalize.

In The Gītā, the idea of Bhagavān begins in Chapter 2 itself, when KṚṢṆA identifies himself as a tool to tame the senses.

> Arjuna, the sage focusses on me to tame his senses and discover wisdom.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 60 (paraphrased).*

But the real discussion on Bhagavān starts when, after having heard KṚṢṆA speak of yagna and yoga, Arjuna expresses his discomfort with introspection and the inner journey.

> KṚṢṆA, I feel the promise of sustaining equanimity through yoga is not easy as the mind is restless, fickle, turbulent like the wind while the senses are fixed and anchored.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, verses 33 and 34 (paraphrased).*

Arjuna's honest admission reveals how it is not enough to simply instruct a seeker or student. Unless the heart feels secure, the head will never receive new ideas. Arjuna needs an anchor, a support, someone to lean on, the comforting hand of Bhagavān. And so KṚṢṆA introduces himself as Bhagavān: the invisible beyond the visible, the immortal beyond the mortal, the infinite beyond the finite, the metaphor beyond the literal. The idea of KṚṢṆA as Bhagavān accelerates from Chapter 7 through chapters 8, 9 and 10 until there is a veritable explosion in Chapter 11, which leaves no doubt in Arjuna's mind that KṚṢṆA is indeed Bhagavān.

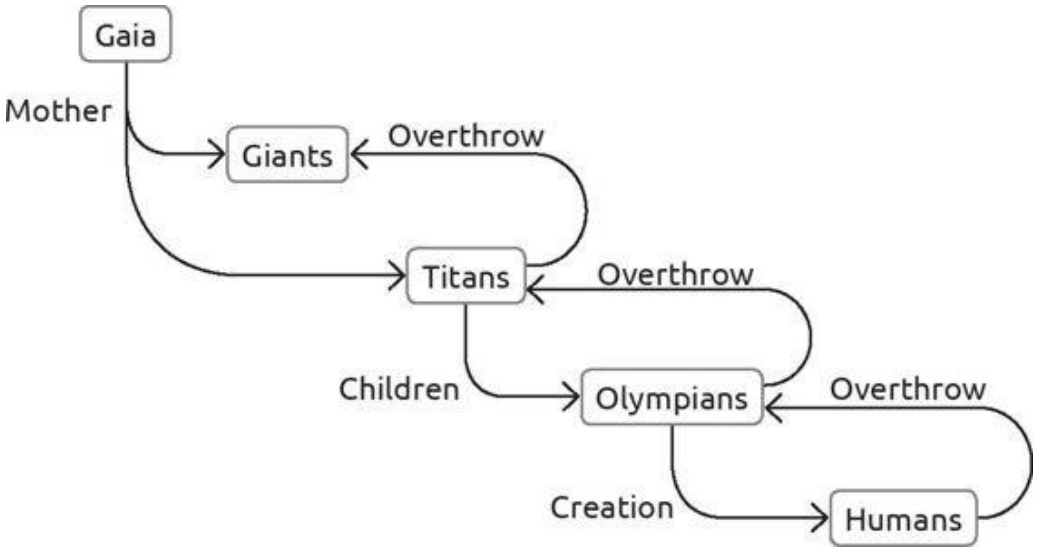
The word used for God in The Gītā is Bhagavān, a departure from the word 'devas' used in the Vedas. The word 'Bhāgavata' was used in Vedic times to mean 'benefactor' or 'bearer of fortune', a title for kings and sages. But The Gītā transformed it. Thus, 2,000 years ago, it came to refer to Bhagavān, especially visualized as KṚṢṆA or Viṣṇū, marking a shift in the dominant theme of Hinduism. While every living creature is apportioned a slice of reality that is its lot in life, Bhagavān is master of every slice.

When the Europeans came to India, they tried long and hard to equate the devas of the Vedas with the Greek Gods and the Bhagavān of The Gītā and the Purāṇas with the Abrahamic God. They argued that just as Christians had shifted from polytheism to monotheism thanks to Christianity, Hindus did so thanks to The Gītā. But such forced comparisons failed, as the **lines between polytheism and monotheism were blurred in Hinduism**. While the **Abrahamic Gods expressly considers Greek Gods to be false**, the Puranic Bhagavān sees the devas as a part of his being. This is not appropriation or inclusion; this is evolution, a journey from the limited to the limitless. It is also a journey from the physical to the psychological. Bhagavān is not 'out there'; Bhagavān is also 'in us' and 'in others'.

The **Hindu Bhagavān resists the finiteness of history and geography that attracted Western mythologies**, but **embraces the infinity offered by psychology**, a subject **that Europeans took seriously only in the twentieth century after the works of Freud and Jung**.

> Arjuna, at the end of many lives, the rare wise man finally realizes: KṚṢṆA is everything. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 7, Verse 19 (paraphrased).*

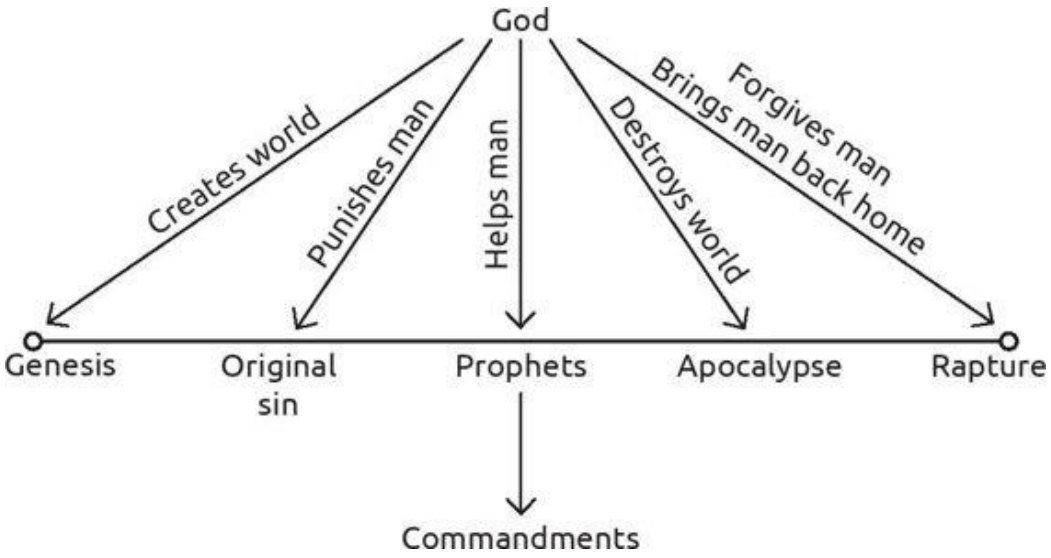
Greek mythology had no concept of a singular almighty God. It had many Gods. First, there were the Titans who violently separated the earth Bhagavāndess, Gaia, from the sky Bhagavān, Uranus, and became the rulers of the world. Then came the Olympians, the children of the Titans, who overthrew them. The Olympians feared that the humans would overthrow them, and so kept them in place through the Fates. But occasionally, grudgingly, they admired a truly independent and defiant being: the hero, whom they gave a special place in the afterlife. The pattern here is overpowering, absorbing and appropriating the conquered. This mythology also shaped the worldview of the Romans who controlled the Mediterranean 2,000 years ago.



Greek Gods

But then 1,700 years ago, in order to unify an increasingly divided empire, the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to

Christianity and rejected all old Bhagavāns in favour of the Bhagavān of Abraham, who allowed worship of none other but Him. This Bhagavān of Abraham was the creator of the world, distinct from the world He had created, who laid down rules of how humans should behave if they wished to return to heaven. This idea formed the basis of Islam as well. But the Muslims rejected the Christian claim that Jesus was the Son of Bhagavān; they believed that Jesus was a prophet, like Abraham and Moses before him, but the final prophet who really mattered was Muhammad. The question of who is the true prophet continues to divide those who subscribe to Abrahamic mythology.



Abrahamic Gods

The God of Abrahamic mythology is constantly described as jealous and possessive, someone who does not tolerate false Gods. The Bhagavān of Hindu mythology does not create such divisions and is seen present in diverse local and folk deities, who serve as portals of a larger singular divine entity.

One can say that the Abrahamic idea of God seeks purity, and so shuns contamination by the 'false', while the Hindu idea of Bhagavān seeks completeness, and so keeps including many incomplete ideas of the divine in the journey towards infinity. This could account for why the legacy of pre-Christian Europe, America and Arabia has been completely wiped out or hidden, while various Vedic, pre-Vedic, post-

Vedic and extra-Vedic practices continue to thrive and influence each other in India, under the large umbrella term called Hinduism.

> Arjuna, those who exchange knowledge in order to venerate me, discover me inside themselves or outside, in multiple forms or as a singular universal whole. —*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 9, Verse 15 (paraphrased).*

The earliest word for Bhagavān in the Ṛg Veda is 'ka', which is the first alphabet in Sanskrit, from which come all the interrogative pronouns such as what, when, where, why, how. Thus, divinity had something to do with enquiry. The kavi, or poet, enquired about ka. He later came to be known as the rishi, the observer.

The rishis also used the word 'brahmana' to refer to divinity. The earliest meaning of brahmana is language—for it is through language that humans make sense of the world around them. In fact, language is what gives humans their humanity and distinguishes them from animals that communicate observation, but have no language to analyse and contemplate abstract thoughts. Brahmana also means expanding the mind, for language expands the mind.

The Vedic rituals invoke one puruśa, a multi-headed and multi-limbed being, who permeates every aspect of the cosmos and whose division creates the world. In the Aranyakas, early speculative texts, there is reference to prajapati, the mind-seed whose union with matter-womb creates the diverse world. Thus, division, and union, of divinity lead to creation. In the Upanishads, later speculative texts, brahmana, puruśa and prajapati are equated with ātmā, the immortal, located inside all beings as jiva-ātmā, and around all beings as para-ātmā. If jiva-ātmā is what one is and para-ātmā is what the other is, then param- ātmā is what one and the other can become. The identification of Bhagavān with humanity starts being passionately debated. From an abstract and mystical concept, Bhagavān increasingly becomes a psychological concept.

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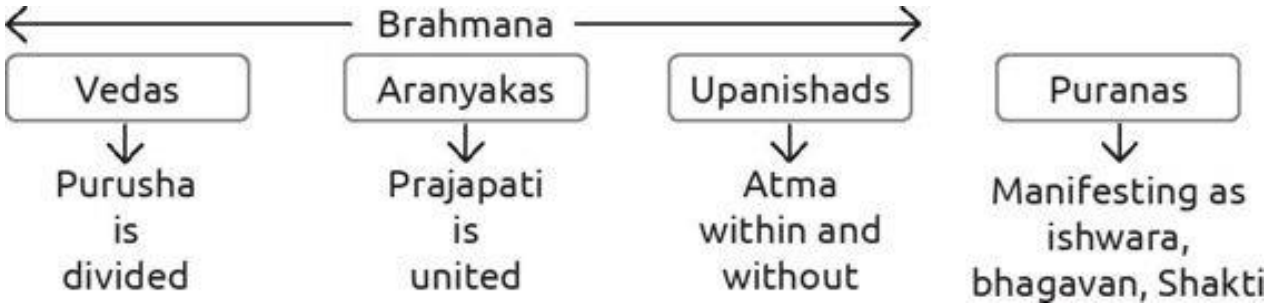
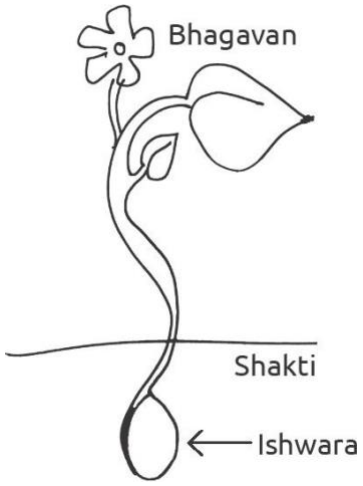


History of Hindu Bhagavān

Two thousand years ago, in the Purāṇas, divinity was finally personified and given the form that we are very familiar with now. In fact, The Gītā plays a key role in the shift. In the pre-Gītā period, Bhagavān was a concept. In the post-Gītā period, Bhagavān became a character in human affairs.

The old abstract words—puruśa, brahmana, prajapati, ātmā — were gradually overshadowed by two new words: ishwara and Bhagavān. Ishwara referred to the seed of divinity and Bhagavān referred to the fully developed tree of divinity, laden with fruits and flowers. Ishwara is associated with Śiva , the hermit, whose marriage to Shakti creates the world. Bhagavān is associated with Viṣṇū, the householder, whose awakening results in creation and whose slumber results in dissolution. Between awakening and sleeping, Viṣṇū takes many forms to walk the earth, including that of KṚṢṆA. The Puranic Śiva and Viṣṇū presuppose the existence of the Bhagavāndess, who is nature, hence mother of humanity, as well as culture, daughter of humanity.

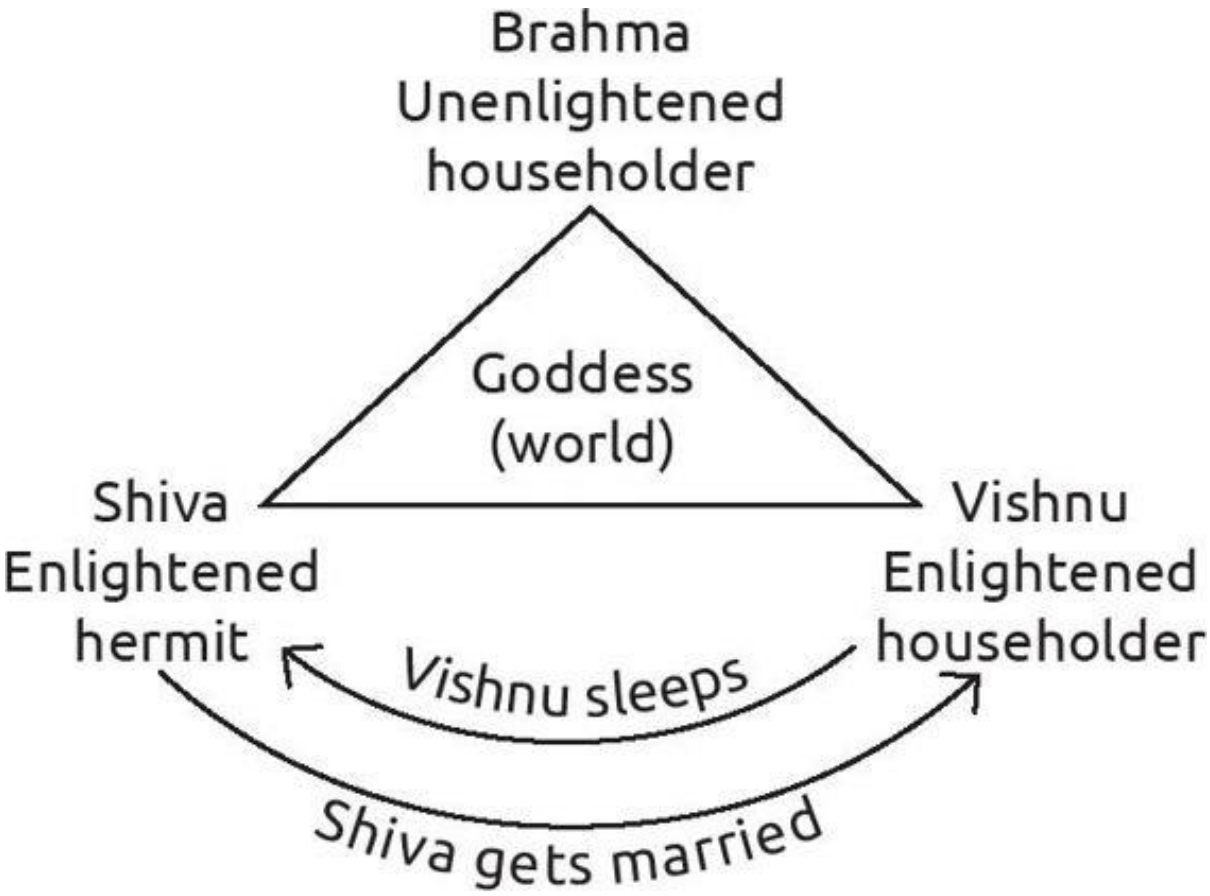


Ishwara, Bhagavān and Shakti

The Bhagavān of Abrahamic mythology shies away from form. The Bhagavān of Hindu mythology is both formless (nir-guna-brahman) and embodied (sa-guna- brahman), as described in Chapter 12 of The Gītā. Without form, He is neither male nor female. With form, He may be birth-less and deathless, as in the case of Śiva , Viṣṇū and the Bhagavāndess, who are described as self-created (swayam-bhu) and not born from the womb (a-yonija). Or He may experience birth and death, as any womb-born (yonija), as in the case of Rāma and KṚṢṆA.

Though formless, the Bhagavān of Abrahamic mythology is addressed, even visualized, in masculine terms. The Bhagavān of Hindu mythology is visualized as sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes both and sometimes neither. Thus, KṚṢṆA refers, in Chapter 7, Verse 6, to the world of matter and mind as his two wombs (yoni), while also speaking of how he places his seed in the womb of Brahma, in Chapter 14, Verse 3. KṚṢṆA also describes himself in feminine terms. In Chapter 10, he identifies himself as the Gaṅgā River and the wish-fulfilling cow Kāmadhenu. Naturally, in Maharashtra, the poet-saints had no problem referring to the local form of KṚṢṆA, Vitthal, as Vittha-ai or Mother Vitthal.

The Bhagavān of Abrahamic mythology has no family or any such human relationships. In Christian mythology, He has a son, but no wife. The Bhagavān of Hinduism is visualized as a householder who deals with mundane human issues in temples and tales. Although the word ‘brahma’ remains sacred throughout Hinduism, referring to the divine potential in all things, the Bhagavān Brahma in the Purāṇas is not worshipped, as he is visualized as the unenlightened householder, who seeks to control the Bhagavāndess, chasing her relentlessly against her will, and so loses a head to Śiva . Śiva is worshipped as the enlightened hermit who is turned into an enlightened householder by the Bhagavāndess. Viṣṇū is worshipped as the enlightened householder who takes responsibility for the Bhagavāndess and adopts various forms to protect her while she provides for him, becoming Rāma when she is Sitā, and KṚṢṆA when she is Rādhā, Satyabhāmāand Draupadi.



Hindu Trinity

From Chapter 7 of The Gītā, the idea of Bhagavān takes centre stage.

> Arjuna, your senses experience eight parts of my manifested form: the five elements, emotions, intelligence and identity. Beyond is my unmanifested form, that supports all this as a string holds a necklace of pearls together.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 7, verses 4 to 7 (paraphrased).*

In Chapter 8, KṚṢṆA connects the impersonal mind (brahman) and impersonal matter (adi-bhuta) to the personal mind (adhyātmā) and the personal body (adi-daiva), via impersonal action (karma) and personal connection (adi- yagna). Thus, divinity is connected with the individual, param-ātmā with jiva- ātmā. KṚṢṆA declares himself as the ultimate source and destination of all things, from where all things come and to which they return.

Arjuna, at the hour of death, he whose mind is yoked by devotion, breath stilled, attention focussed, thinks of me, comes to me.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 8, Verse 6 (paraphrased).*

In Chapter 9, KṚṢṆA says that he is accessible to all, even those considered bad or inferior.

Arjuna, even those you consider villains should be respected if you find them walking my path, for they too will eventually find peace and joy. None of my devotees are lost, not even those generally held in disdain by the royal warriors: women, traders, labourers and servants, even those considered illegitimate.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 9, verses 30 to 32 (paraphrased).*

In Chapter 10, KṚṢṆA says that he is present in all things, manifesting as excellence.

Arjuna, I am the life existing in all things. I am the beginning, the middle and the end. Amongst Adityas, I am Viṣṇū; amongst lights, the sun; amongst winds, the mirage; amongst constellations, the moon; amongst the books of knowledge, the melodies; amongst devas, Indra; amongst senses, the mind; amongst organisms, the awareness; amongst rudras, Śiva ; amongst yakshas and rakshasas, Kubera; amongst elements, fire; amongst mountains, Meru; amongst priests, Brihaspati; amongst commanders, Kartikeya; amongst waterbodies, the ocean; amongst seers, BhṚgu; amongst chants, aum; amongst rituals, recitation; amongst the immobile, the Himalayas; amongst trees, the fig; amongst messengers, Nārada; amongst gandharvas, Chitraratha; amongst yogis, Kapila; amongst horses, Uchhaishrava; amongst elephants, Airavata; amongst people, the leader; amongst weapons, the thunderbolt; amongst cows, the wish-fulfilling cow; amongst lovers, Kāma; amongst earthly serpents, Vasuki; amongst celestial serpents, Ananta; amongst ocean- dwellers, Varuna; amongst forefathers, Aryaman; amongst regulators, Yama; amongst asuras, Prahalada; amongst reckoners, Yama; amongst beasts, the lion; amongst birds, the eagle; amongst cleansers, the wind; amongst warriors, Rāma; amongst fish, the dolphin; amongst rivers, Gaṅgā; amongst metres, Gayatri; amongst months, December; amongst

seasons, spring; amongst deception, gambling; amongst my people, me; amongst your people, you; amongst storytellers, Vyāsa; amongst poets, Shukra. I am the staff of the guardians, the strategy of the ambitious, the silence of secrets, the wisdom of the wise. I am the seed, without me there can be no element, no plant, no animal. There is no end to my manifestations. These are but samples of infinity—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 10, verses 20 to 40 (paraphrased).*

In Chapter 11, KṚṢṆA shows his expansive form (viraṭ-swarup), on Arjuna's request and Arjuna discovers Bhagavān as the infinite container (vishwa- rupa), cause and consequence of all things, at all times, and more.

> Arjuna, behold my forms, hundreds, thousands, of myriad colours and shapes. Behold the thirty-three Vedic Bhagavāns: eight vasus, twelve adityas, eleven maruttas, two ashwins and many more things never known before. See the entire universe in my body, the animate and the inanimate. Let me give you special eyes so that you can see this special sight.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 11, verses 5 to 8 (paraphrased)*.

After KṚṢṆA describes himself, Sanjaya describes what Arjuna saw.

> King, so saying, that great master of yoga revealed his divine form to Arjuna. Many mouths, many eyes, many adornments, many weapons, facing all directions, brilliant as a thousand suns rising, thus did Arjuna see the diverse world in one body. His hair stood on end and he bowed reverentially.'—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 11, verses 9 to 14 (paraphrased).*
>
> And finally, Arjuna describes what he sees.
>
> KṚṢṆA, I see you and in you all deities, serpents, sages and Brahma seated on a lotus. You are everywhere, resplendent, the original one, the goal, the anchor, the defender, without beginning, middle or end, of infinite arms and of infinite strength. The sun and moon are your eyes, blazing, fire in your mouth, filling the void between earth and sky with your infinite

limbs, infinite trunks. All beings enter you, admire you, venerate you. In your mouth, between your teeth, you grind entire words, all warriors too, those on that side and this.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 11, verses 15 to 30 (paraphrased).*

In Chapter 12, after KṚṢṆA returns to his original form, he speaks of how he can be perceived in different forms, or even without form.

Some realize me by worshipping my form. Some realize me formless through meditation. For most people, it is easier to worship form than the formless.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 12, verses 2 to 5 (paraphrased).*

This Bhagavān of Hindu mythology, churned out of Vedic hymns, declares that He is the very source and destination of the Vedas and everything else, in The Gītā. In other words, language reveals the idea of Bhagavān and the idea of Bhagavān declares it gave birth to language. The form reveals the formless, which makes the form meaningful. The Hindu idea of Bhagavān, presented through language and the liberal use of metaphors, is located inside humanity, not outside. It is what makes humans yearn for, and find, meaning. It is what makes humans outgrow fear and expand the mind to discover immortality, infinity. It is what enables humans to care for others. It is what everyone can be. This rather psychological understanding of Bhagavān is unique to Hinduism, and distinguishes it from Western mythologies.

I want you to be Bhagavān: see my slice of reality, my insecurity and my vulnerability, and comfort me, without making me feel small. You have that potential. So do I. If not you and I, then surely there is somebody else.

11.
You and I can include

To discover Bhagavān within, we have to go beyond our slice of reality and appreciate the hungers and fears of those around us. For that we have to discover **brahmana** by expanding our mind, an idea that is best explored through the character of Hanuman, the monkey Bhagavān who plays a key role in the epic RāMāyāṇa, and whose image flutters on Arjuna's flag. Hanuman became a popular deity in the ten centuries after the writing of The Gītā, when Hindu monastic traditions waxed while Buddhist monastic traditions waned.

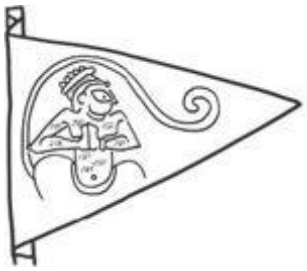
Arjuna's flag is known as kapi-dhvaja, as it has the image of a monkey (kapi) on it. Monkeys have long represented the human mind, as like the mind they are restless, dominating and territorial, clinging to the source of comfort, their mother, until they grow up. Another word for kapi is va-nara, meaning less than human. It is derived from vana-nara, meaning forest (vana) people (nara).

But the monkey atop Arjuna's flag is no ordinary one. It is Hanuman, the mightiest of monkeys, whose story is told in the epic, RāMāyāṇa. He is always visualized at the feet of Rāma, who appears human (nara) but is actually Bhagavān (Nārāyaṇa, the refuge of nara). Nara and Nārāyaṇa also refer to a pair of inseparable Vedic sages, avatars of Viṣṇū. The inseparable Arjuna and KṚṢṆA are considered Nara and Nārāyaṇa reborn.

Va-nara, nara and Nārāyaṇa represent three aspects of our existence: animal, human and divine. Scientists now speak of how the human part of the brain is a recent development and sits on top of the older animal brain. The animal brain is rooted in fear, and focusses on survival, while the human brain is rooted in imagination, and so seeks to understand itself by understanding nature.

Between survival and understanding comes judging—the state when everything and everyone around is evaluated based on imagined benchmarks, in order to position oneself. The animal wants to identify the other as predator or prey, rival or mate. The judge wants to classify the world as good or bad, innocent or guilty, right or wrong, oppressor or oppressed, based on his or her own framework. The observer wants to figure out what exactly is going on.

The journey from animal to judge to observer is the journey of va-nara to nara to Nārāyaṇa. It involves the uncrumpling of aham, the frightened mind, and the eventual discovery of ātmā, the secure mind. This is what it means to be brahmana.



Narayana	God	Other realization
Nara	Human	Self-realization
Va-nara	Animal	Self-preservation Self-propagation

Expansion of Mind

The word brahmana has two roots: expansion (brah) and mind (manas). In the Ṛg Veda—depending on usage—it refers to language, the power of language to expand the mind, and the expanded mind. The student was referred to as a brahmachari, one who was expected to behave such that his mind expanded. Later, it came to refer to ritual manuals (brahmana texts), and eventually to keepers of these texts (the brahmana caste, more popularly known as Brāhmaṇas). Even later, it became a character in the Purāṇas, Brahma, the creator of the world, who is so consumed by his creation that he forgets his own identity and becomes unworthy of worship. Viṣṇū enables the many

sons of Brahma to expand their mind. Some succeed, some don't. In the RāMāyāṇa, Rāma enables the transformation of Hanuman from the servant, Rāma-dasa, to Maha-bali, a deity in his own right. In the Mahābhārata, KṚṢṆA struggles to transform the Pāṅdava brothers and partially succeeds. Unlike in Greek epics, where the human protagonist transforms into something extraordinary, in Hindu epics, the human protagonist is Bhagavān, who enables the transformation of those around.

The Gītā uses the words 'brahmana' and 'brahma' to refer to the sacred: the human ability to expand the mind and discover divinity and find meaning everywhere, as elaborated in the following hymn often chanted by Hindus before meals.

Arjuna, the one who offers food is divine, the food that is offered is divine, the one who receives the food is divine, the one who consumes the food is divine. Everything will surely become divine to one willing to expand the mind.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, Verse 24 (paraphrased).*

This idea takes the shape of a story in the Purāṇas where the people of Ayodhyā are amused to see Hanuman biting into the pearls given to him by Sitā. 'What's the use of these pearls,' says Hanuman, 'if they do not contain Sitā's Rāma?' Hanuman then tears open his chest to reveal Sitā's Rāma. Hanuman thus reveals his deep understanding of dehi—what is located within the deha. He seeks dehi everywhere and thus expands his mind and finds brahmana.

Hanuman's Dehi

Brahmana represents a state when humans have totally overpowered the animal brain; in other words, outgrown fear. We do not look at the other as predator or prey, mate or rival. We do not seek to judge the other in order to position ourselves. Our identity is not dependent on the other. It is independent, devoid of the need for props. We either withdraw as Śiva does, or engage as Viṣṇū does, in order to enable the insecure other, who is entrapped in a crumpled mind.

> Arjuna, to expand your mind, use intelligence to draw your mind away from sensuality, so that there is no self-obsession, aggression, arrogance, desire, anger, possessiveness, attraction or repulsion. You are content in solitude, consuming little, expressing little, connected with the world and aware.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, verses 51 to 53 (paraphrased).*

How will a man with expanded mind behave? We learn this from the RāMāyāṇa, the epic that tells the story of Rāma, a prince exiled to the forest following palace intrigues. In the forest, he encounters rakshasas and vanaras, traditionally described as demons and monkeys, essentially creatures yet to expand their mind. The king of the rakshasas, Rāvaṇa, kidnaps Rāma's wife, while the vanaras help him get her back.

Rāvaṇa, king of the rakshasas, is a Brāhmaṇa's son, well versed in the Vedas. Yet he shows all traits of an alpha male such as domination and territoriality. He makes himself king of Lanka by driving out his brother, Kubera. He tries to make Sitā his queen and is quite infuriated, and bewildered, when she rejects his advances and stays faithful to Rāma.

Sugriva, king of the vanaras, agrees to help Rāma provided he helps him overthrow Vālī, who has kicked him out of the kingdom of Kishkinda, following a misunderstanding, rather than sharing the throne, as their father wished. Rāma kills Vālī, but Sugriva promptly forgets his promise, until Lakshmana threatens him with dire consequences.

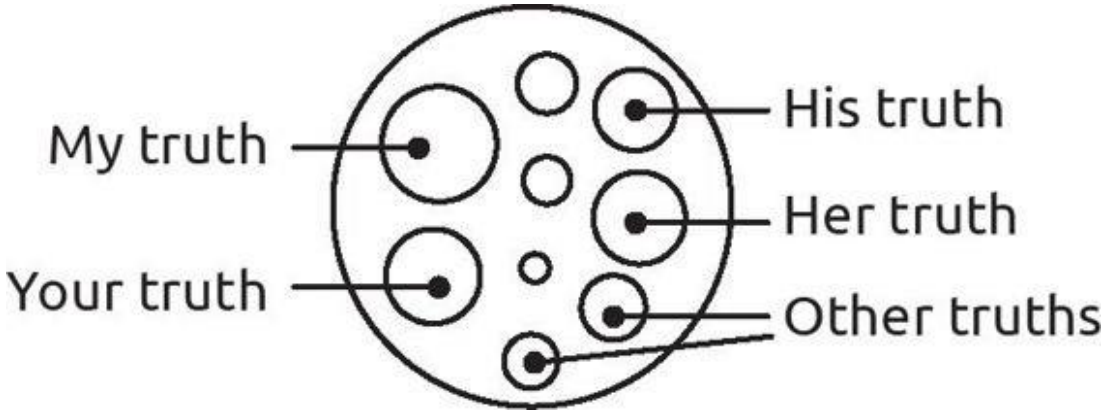
Like Rāvaṇa, Hanuman is well versed in the Veda. Like Sugriva, Hanuman is also a vanara. But he is very different. He observes and understands. He serves Sugriva because he is obliged to: Sugriva's father, the sun Bhagavān Surya, is his guru. He protects Sugriva from Vālī's excesses, but does not fight Vālī as Vālī is no enemy of his. Of his own volition, he serves Rāma. He joins the fight against Rāvaṇa, even though Rāvaṇa is no enemy of his, because he realizes that Rāma also does not see Rāvaṇa as his enemy. In Rāma's eyes, there are no villains, or victims, or heroes, just humans who continue to indulge in animal-like behaviour out of fear, thereby following adharma rather than dharma. Rāma fights Rāvaṇa because Rāvaṇa does not listen to human reason, and prefers animal force. No one by Hanuman recognizes that Rāma is no nara; he is Nārāyaṇa. This discovery enables Hanuman to expand his mind, make choices and take responsibility, transform from animal to Bhagavān. This is why there are independent temples dedicated to Hanuman.

> Arjuna, the wise let go of the fruit of action, and so break free from the cycle of rebirths. Their wisdom cuts through formal hymns and official words, for yoga connects them with who they really are. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, verses 51 to 53 (paraphrased).*

When Hanuman follows Rāma back to Ayodhyā, he observes how Rāma casts out a pregnant Sitā, following street gossip about her soiled reputation due to contact with Rāvaṇa. But he does not judge Rāma. He observes how Rāma, as scion of a royal clan, cannot break clan rules and must uphold clan reputation at all costs. He observes how Rāma never abandons his people, even though they are being petty, nor does he try to convince them of his wife's innocence. Rāma refuses to be Ayodhyā's judge or Sitā's lawyer. He simply refuses to remarry: he may have abandoned the queen, but he will never abandon his wife.

> Arjuna, he who sees the divine as present equally in all things does not hurt himself by hurting others and so attains the ultimate state.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, Verse 28 (paraphrased).*

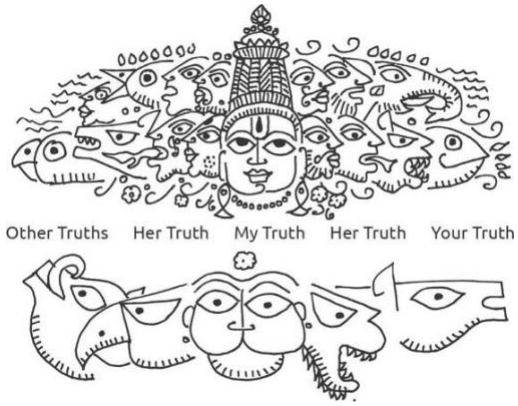
Hanuman also observes how Sitā refuses to return to Rāma's Ayodhyā, though not even for a moment does she doubt his love for her and her love for him. In a world of rules, everyone makes choices and every choice has consequences. Karma applies to Rāma and Sitā too. No matter what the circumstances, neither Rāma nor Sitā abandons dharma. Hanuman thus realizes what it takes to be Nārāyaṇa: to be independent, yet dependable.



Bhagavān's Truth

Hanuman serves Rāma, Bhagavān without, and discovers the Bhagavān within. KṚṢṆA serves Arjuna and displays his divine form, so that Arjuna feels reassured and secure enough to the make the inner journey, which will enable his outer journey.

Hanuman enters the Mahābhārata when the Pāṅdavas are in exile. Unlike Rāma who is at peace despite being exiled for no fault of his own, the Pāṅdavas feel like victims even though it is they who gambled away their kingdom.



Expanded Mind

Hanuman encounters Bhima as he walks through the forest like an entitled prince, refusing to go around rocks or trees, walking straight, expecting animals to stay clear of his path, so different from the caring and accommodating Rāma. In the form of an old monkey, Hanuman reclines on Bhima's path and refuses to make way. 'Kick my tail aside and go ahead. I am too weak to move it myself.' Bhima tries to do so, even uses all his legendary strength, but fails to move the monkey's tail by even an inch. Thus humbled, he recognizes the monkey is Hanuman teaching him a lesson. Hanuman then displays his gigantic form, the one he took to leap over the ocean to find Lanka, a reminder never to underestimate the potential of things around.

Hanuman also encounters Arjuna just before the war, when Arjuna wonders aloud why Rāma did not build a bridge of arrows to cross the ocean into Lanka. 'Maybe such a bridge would not hold the weight of a monkey,' says Hanuman. To prove him wrong Arjuna builds a bridge of arrows across the sea. As soon as Hanuman steps on it, it collapses. This happens again and again, until KṚṢṆA advises Arjuna to chant Rāma's name while releasing his arrows. This Arjuna does and now the bridge is so strong that even when Hanuman takes his giant form, the bridge does not break. Thus the power of faith in the divine is demonstrated over skill and strength.

'When you were Rāma, I was at your feet,' says Hanuman to KṚṢṆA. 'Now can I be on top of your head?' KṚṢṆA agrees. Arjuna is shocked: a monkey on KṚṢṆA's head? 'What is wrong, Arjuna?' asks KṚṢṆA, 'Wherefrom comes your assumption of superiority? I sit at your feet. Can Hanuman not be atop your head?'

> Arjuna, he who does not hate anyone, is friendly and compassionate always, is not possessive and self-indulgent, stable in pleasure and pain, forgiving, contained, controlled and firm in his love for me, in heart and head, is much loved by me.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 12, verses 13 and 14 (paraphrased).*

The difference between the Pāṅdavas and Rāma is thus repeatedly demonstrated. Rāma is not a great king because he is a king or a hero, but because his mind has expanded and he hates no

one. The Pāṅdavas are insecure, despite having strength and skills, and constantly seek Vālīdation. In their fear, they fail to see the love around. By observing Rāma, Hanuman discovers the love of the ātmā beyond the fears of aham. By listening to The Gītā, KṚṢṆA hopes that Arjuna will discover the same.

When I feel that you acknowledge, appreciate and accommodate my worldview, rather than dismissing, tolerating, adoring or even following it, I know you are expanding your mind and walking the path of brahmana.

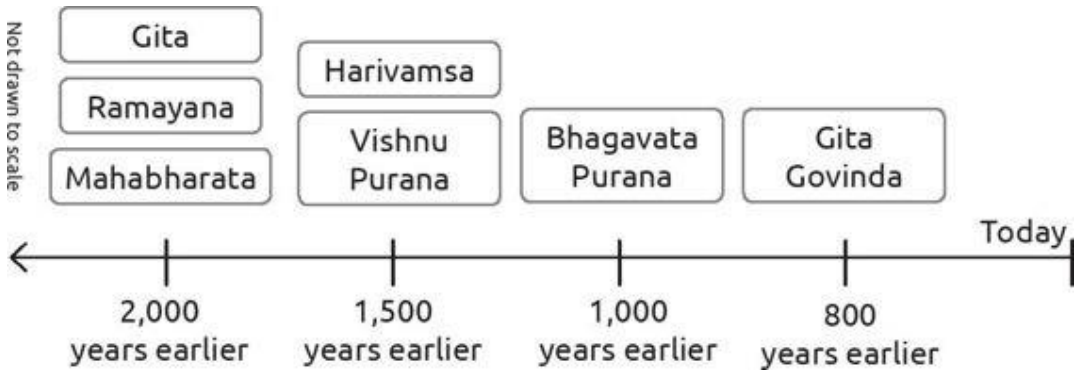
12.
You and I can accommodate

An expanding mind can contract to accommodate the limited view of others. A mother, for example, can display mock rage to delight her child. Thus the limited worldview of the child is indulged, and emotionally nourished. At the same time, the mother is nourished by meaning and realization of potential. A healthy relationship, like a yagna, is always two-way, not one-way. That is why an **avatar** is not just a teacher or a saviour, as we shall discover through the character of Rādhā, who appeared in the Hindu landscape eight centuries ago as the flower of the Bhāgavata plant whose seed was planted by The Gītā. Rādhā replaced devotion with afection, made Bhagavān both lover and beloved, and completed the divine with femininity.

There are over forty names by which KṚṢṆA is addressed in The Gītā, but only one refers to his pastoral roots: Govinda, which means the cowherd.

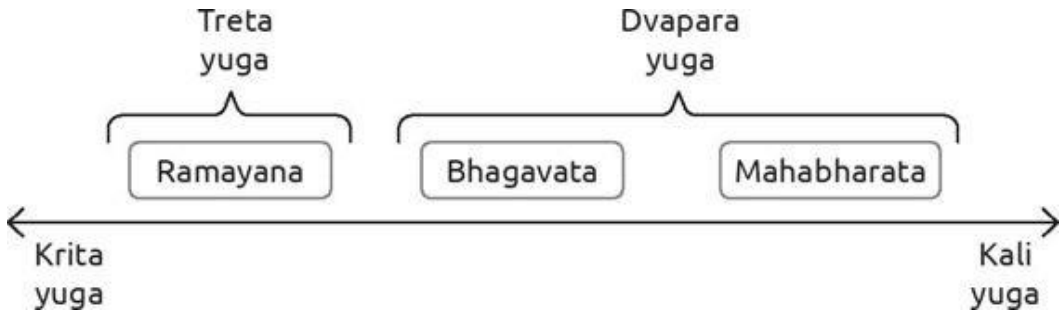
Specific to Krishna	Specific to Vishnu	Generic names for the divine
Govinda (1.32)	Achyuta (1.21)	Adideva (11.38)
Hari (11.9)	Adhiyajna (8.2)	Amitavikrama (11.40)
Hrsikesha (1.15)	Adikarta (11.37)	Aprameya (11.17)
Janardana (1.35)	Ananta (11.37)	Apratimaprabhava (11.43)
Keshava (1.30)	Ananta-rupa (11.38)	Bhutabhavana (9.5)
Kesinishudana (18.1)	Ananta-virya (11.19)	Bhutabhrun (9.5)
Krishna—(1.28)	Arisudana (2.4)	Bhutesha (10.15)
Madhava (1.14)	Bhagavan (10.14)	Deva (11.14)
Madhusudana (1.34)	Jagannivasa (11.25)	Devadeva (10.15)
Sakha (11.41)	Jagatpati (10.15)	Devavara (11.31)
Varsneya (1.40)	Kamalapatraksha (11.2)	Devesha (11.25)
Vasudeva (7.19)	Mahabahu (6.38)	Isha (11.44)
Yadava (11.41)	Purushottama (8.1)	Ishvara (4.6)
	Sahasrabahu (11.46)	Kala (11.32)
	Vishnu (10.21)	Mahatma (11.12)
	Visvamurti (11.46)	Mahayogeshvara (11.9)
	Visvarupa (11.16)	Parameshvara (11.3)
	Visvesvara (11.16)	Prabhu (9.18)
	Yajna (3.9, 4.23)	Prajapati (3.10)
		Prapitamaha (11.39)
		Ugrarupa (11.31)
		Yogesvara (11.4)
		Yogi (10.17)

We cannot imagine KṚṢṆA today without cows, cowherds and milkmaids (gopikas). But the lore of his childhood amongst pastoral communities was elaborated and put down in writing only after the composition of the Mahābhārata and The Gītā, in the fourth-century Harivamsa, the fifth-century Viṣṇū Purāṇa, the tenth-century Bhāgavata Purāṇa (also known as Shreemad Bhāgavatam, or simply Bhāgavata) and finally, the twelfth-century Gītā Govinda by the poet Jayadeva, which introduces us to Rādhā.



Bhāgavata in Historical Timeline

In the Harivamsa, great value is placed on KṚṢṆA's parents, Nanda and Yashoda, who are cowherds, and his secret dalliances with gopikas. We are introduced to the rasa-mandala, the circular dance formation. But here, KṚṢṆA is not exclusive to any one gopika; he dances with all. In the Gītā Govinda, which was written a few centuries later, Rādhā appears and demands exclusive attention. In both, KṚṢṆA ultimately leaves the cowherd life and moves to Mathurā, and thereafter gets involved in the events described in the Mahābhārata. Many regional works that followed etched this pastoral KṚṢṆA, son of Yashoda, beloved of Rādhā, in the Hindu mind. Collectively, we may call all of this Bhāgavata lore. Whatever be the historical timeline, in terms of narrative, and psychologically, the Bhāgavata is located between the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata.



Bhāgavata in Narrative Timeline

The Bhāgavata is distinct from the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata. The RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata focus a lot on masculine anxiety over power and property. The Bhāgavata focusses on feminine anxiety about abandonment and affection. Anxieties stem from our desire to survive. In nature, the quest for survival gives rise to sex and violence. Hermits, however, seek to give up sex

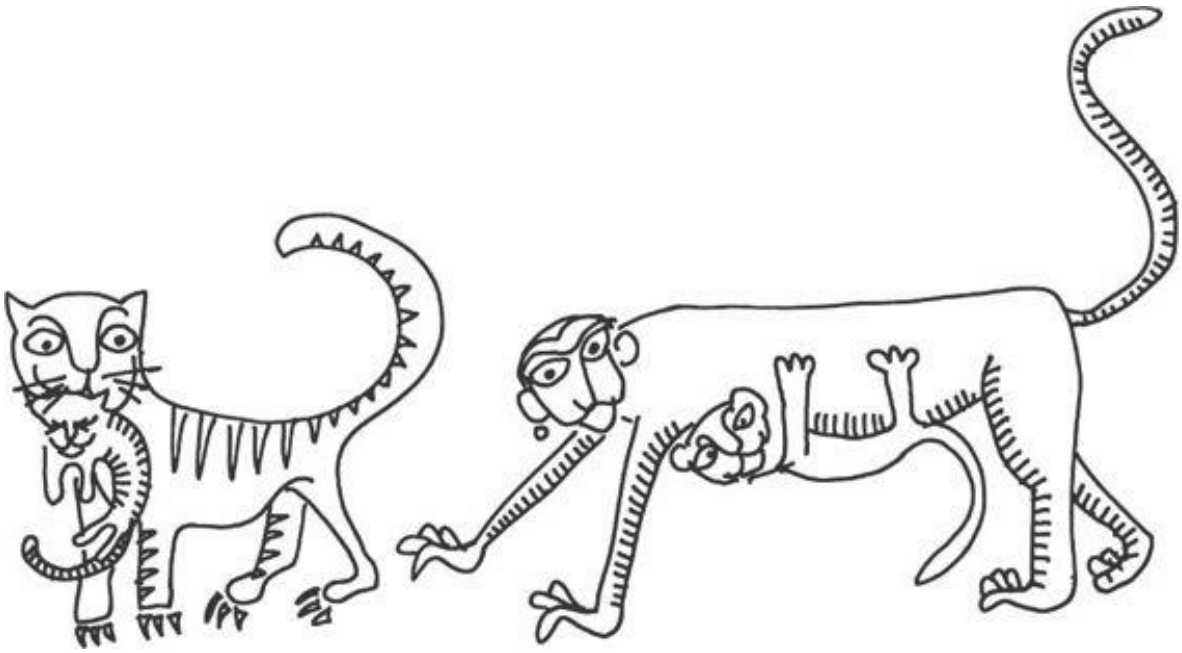
and violence completely, through practice of celibacy and non-violence, in order to be rid of all anxiety. Householder traditions seek to minimize anxiety by regulating sex and violence through rules of marriage and property. The RāMāyāṇa elaborates this. The Mahābhārata reveals how rules can be manipulated with clever logic, and how this can take us away from the path of dharma. The Bhāgavata elaborates on the emotions (bhāva) that underlie rules, sex and violence, and places primacy on emotions over rules. If Buddhism speaks of shunning desire to break free from suffering, if the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata speak of regulating desire with responsibility, the Bhāgavata qualifies desire with love.

The Bhāgavata creates an emotional highway between the devotee (bhagata/bhakta) and the deity (Bhagavān), transforming intellectual and pragmatic Vedic conversations (Upanishad) into effusive adoration (upasana). Here, the self (jiva) can be the parent, like Yashoda, to the divine other (param), who is the child. Here the self can also be a lover, like one of the gopikas who pines for the divine other, who is the beloved. When Rādhā comes along she even transforms the divine into a lover who pines for her, the beloved. The seed of the Bhāgavata traditions can be traced to The Gītā itself.

> Arjuna, the one who offers me, with affection, a flower, a fruit, some water, a leaf, I accept.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 9, Verse 26 (paraphrased).*

Here, the devotee is expected to be active in devotion and cling to the deity like a baby monkey clings to its mother. In other verses, the devotee is expected to be passive in devotion, like a kitten trusting that its mother will take care of it.

> Arjuna, give up all that you are doing and have full faith in me. I will free you from all fetters. Do not worry. —*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, Verse 66 (paraphrased).*



Cat Mother and Monkey Mother

In both cases, Bhagavān is placed on a pedestal: Bhagavān is the parent and saviour. In the RāMāyāṇa, Sitā has no doubt that Rāma will find a way to rescue her from the clutches of the mighty Rāvaṇa. In the Mahābhārata, when her husbands fail to protect her, Draupadi turns to KṚṢṆA, who prevents her public disrobing at the hands of the Kauravas. The emotional highway between devotee and deity moves one way—the devotee is dependent on Bhagavān; Bhagavān is not dependent on the devotee.

> Arjuna, I know that those who existed in the past exist in the present and will exist in the future. None know me.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 7, Verse 26 (paraphrased).*

But there is a festering incompleteness in the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata. At the end of the RāMāyāṇa, Rāma abandons Sitā. Despite being faultless, she finds herself the subject of street gossip and is cast out of the palace, forced to fend for herself in the forest. At the end of the Mahābhārata, KṚṢṆA grants Draupadi her revenge by ensuring that all the Kauravas and their commanders are killed. But revenge comes at a price: all of Draupadi's children, her five sons, are killed too. The jiva-ātmā feels abandoned. Has the saviour failed?

Bhāgavata traditions take this conversation forward. The one-way emotional highway becomes two-way, involving not merely transaction but transformation. The Bhāgavata shifts the balance of power.

In the 1,000 years that followed The Gītā, the doctrine of Bhakti was elaborated. It took two distinct routes—the masculine route, based on submission, celibacy and restraint, embodied in Hanuman; and the feminine route, based on affection, sensuality and demand, embodied in Yashoda and Rādhā. The masculine route was favoured by the mathas, the Hindu monastic order. The feminine route was favoured by the devadasis, temple dancers who used the performing arts to connect the masses with the divine.

One can say that the masculine route, grounded in celibacy, was the route of Vedāṅta, and the feminine route, grounded in pleasure, was the route of Tantra. These two thoughts emerged as distinct branches from the seventh century onwards. This happened because the old division between the Buddhist hermit and the Hindu householder was collapsing. The Hindu householder started adopting hermit practices like vegetarianism, while Hindu hermits began reaching out to the masses through song and dance, practices previously associated only with the household.

More importantly, knowledge transmission was no longer top-down. It did not just come from priests who performed rituals and kings who rode chariots and controlled the land. Ideas were even coming from the bottom upwards, even from cowherds who wandered the countryside with their cattle in search of pastures. In the new discourse, Bhagavān was not a feudal overlord to whom one submitted. Bhagavān was a commoner who sought affection and returned affection. The distant Rāma was overshadowed by the more accessible Hanuman. KṚṢṆA, the cowherd, beloved of the gopikas, overshadowed KṚṢṆA, guardian of the Yadavas and guide of the Pāṅdavas.

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	Anxiety	Comforts
Masculine	Achievement	Submission Devotion
Feminine	Abandonment	Affection

Masculine Submission and Feminine Affection

The story of KṚṢṆA's childhood mimics a Greek epic until we start considering the role of the women. It begins with a prophecy that Kansa, the dictator of Mathurā, will be killed by his own nephew, the eighth son of his sister, Devaki. Kansa imprisons Devaki and kills all the sons she bears. To save the eighth child, Devaki's husband, Vasudeva, takes the newborn across the river Yamuna to the village of cowherds, Gokul, and switches babies, bringing back a cowherd girl child born the same night. Years later, when KṚṢṆA returns to Mathurā and kills Kansa, his true identity is revealed. But many still refer to him as the son of a cowherd, rather contemptuously, an indicator of social hierarchy. But family name and honour, so important to Rāma, do not matter to KṚṢṆA. He has discovered something deeper—love—that conquers all anxieties.

KṚṢṆA owes this discovery to the milkmaids of Gokul and Vṛndā-vana. They collectively raised KṚṢṆA as their own child, showered him with affection, indulged his pranks, suffered his mischief, admonished him when he crossed the line and loved him as a mother would, even though none of them had given birth to him. This is parental love (vatsalya bhāva), embodied in Yashoda.

KṚṢṆA and Yashoda

When KṚṢṆA becomes a youth, his relationship with the gopikas changes. Pranks give way to flirtation. The child is forgotten as the man takes over. The women now quietly slip out of their homes at night when their family is asleep and go deep into the forest (vana), unafraid to dance in a circle around KṚṢṆA, who plays the enchanting flute. There are passionate disagreements, demands, separations and reunions. He is not their brother, father, son or husband. Theirs is not a relationship governed by niti (law) or riti (tradition). Yet, in his company, they feel alive and secure. It is a relationship that springs from within, and is not forced from without. Everything is authentic but private, for it is beyond the comprehension of the public. This is love evoked by presence (mādhurya bhāva), union (Śringāra bhāva) and even absence (viraha bhāva), embodied in Rādhā.

When KṚṢṆA leaves the village of Vṛndā-vana for the city of Mathurā, he promises he will be back. But he cannot keep that promise. He sends his friend, Uddhava, to inform his village of his decision to stay in the city, and to comfort them in heartbreak. Uddhava's advice is intellectual in approach and monastic in spirit: he

speaks of the impermanent nature of things and the importance of letting go. Rādhā replies with a smile— she is not afraid of pain and suffering and abandonment. In fact, she relishes it, for it reminds her of KṚṢṆA. 'He is the black bee who moves from flower to flower, but I am the flower that cannot leave its tree. He has transformed me, enabled me to turn into a fruit that contains the seed of love.'

KṚṢṆA and Rādhā

The abandoned women of Gokul and Vṛndā-vana, be it the mother, Yashoda, or the lover, Rādhā, express what the abandoned women of the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata do not: love, not anger. They do not judge KṚṢṆA. They don't expect him to ask for

forgiveness, because there is nothing to forgive. They do not begrudge him his ambitions, his compulsions and his adventures. They don't want him to turn back. They accept the nature of nature: nothing lasts forever, everything changes. They want their beloved to move on his outer journey, just as their love for him inspires them to undertake their inner journey. They are no longer dependent on him. But they will always be dependable for him.

This attitude of the womenfolk has a huge impact on KṚṢṆA. Being Bhagavān is not about being limitless, it is about allowing the limited and including the limited, despite all their shortcomings, as a wise parent allows a child to grow up and go on his or her own path. KṚṢṆA acknowledges his indebtedness to the gopikas of Gokul when despite being male, he always strikes a very female pose, the tri-bhagna. This makes him the purna-avatar, the complete incarnation of Viṣṇū to walk the earth.

In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, we find the story of how Yashoda once found baby KṚṢṆA eating dirt. She scolded him and forced him to open his mouth so that she could wash the dirt away. But within his mouth she beheld a vision of the whole universe, similar to the one Arjuna sees in Chapter 11 of The Gītā. It terrified her. For a moment she realized the awesomeness of her child. But then she resumed her maternal duties, bathing him, feeding him, educating him, admonishing him when the neighbours complained about his pranks, even punishing him when he disobeyed. He might be Bhagavān, but she was his mother. For her sake, the deity became a child. For his sake, the devotee stayed a mother.

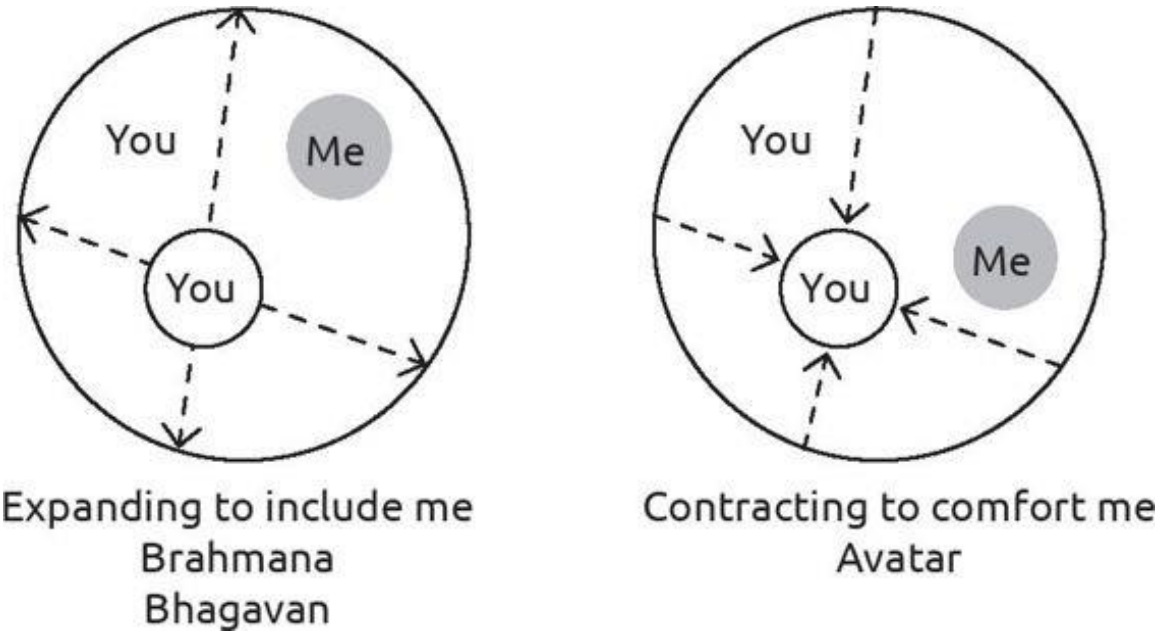
Yoga may expand our mind, but love demands that we contract ourselves so that our lover does not feel inadequate or inferior. This conscious contraction of divinity is why the infinite Bhagavān descends on earth as the finite avatar, experiencing death as Rāma and KṚṢṆA for the benefit of his devotees. In Chapter 11, Arjuna wants to see KṚṢṆA in his cosmic form. A curious child, the thought excites him.

> KṚṢṆA, I have heard in detail the grand nature of the world, how things fold and unfold. I am curious to see your divine form that ou describe. Show me, if you feel I can handle it.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 11, verses 2 to 4 (paraphrased).*

But when KṚṢṆA does display his form, its awesomeness ends up intimidating Arjuna, for it suddenly makes him aware of his insignificance in the cosmic canvas.

> KṚṢṆA, I am happy to see your secret form, but it frightens me. Return to your original form, please. —*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 11, Verse 45 (paraphrased).*

The thousand-armed Bhagavān becomes the two-armed friend and charioteer once again. If devotion to Rāma makes Hanuman expand and become Bhagavān, then affection for Arjuna makes KṚṢṆA contract to become an avatar. He is like the mother who pretends not to see the child while playing a game of hide-and-seek. Though limitless himself, he submits to the limited truth of those around him. These are the games (leela) the deity-parent plays with the devotee-child. The aim of Bhagavān's contraction (avatarana) is to uplift the devotee (uddhar). For Bhagavān can see all slices of reality and can make the bhakta see more than just the one.



Expanding and Contracting

Rāma uplifts Hanuman, but KṚṢṆA realizes that Arjuna does not have the same capacity and capability as Hanuman. However, he does not make Arjuna feel small. Like Yashoda and Rādhā, he never judges the Pāṅdavas, never makes them feel guilty for gambling away their kingdom. He simply prepares them to face the consequences of their action.

Darśan of the other enables us to acknowledge and accept their inadequacies. This makes them neither small nor helpless. It just makes them different. A student may not learn because he does not have the capacity, or because he does not have the will or because he does not have the resources. None of these makes the wise teacher unhappy, for he knows that teaching is about the student's benefit, not for his aggrandizement. He cannot control the karma of the student; he can only focus on the svāhā of his yagna, plant the karma-bija and not seek control over the karma-fala.

Likewise, a wise man never argues when a less learned man argues with him. He knows when to expand and when to contract, when to give and when to receive. Darśan of the limited other enables the self to gain insight into the human condition and further expand the mind. By submitting to the truth, the yajamāna experiences brahmana.

A hermit does not want to do yagna. A saviour is only a benefactor (yajamāna). But a lover is both benefactor (yajamāna) and beneficiary (Devatā). In The Gītā, KṚṢṆA identifies himself with the input to the yagna.

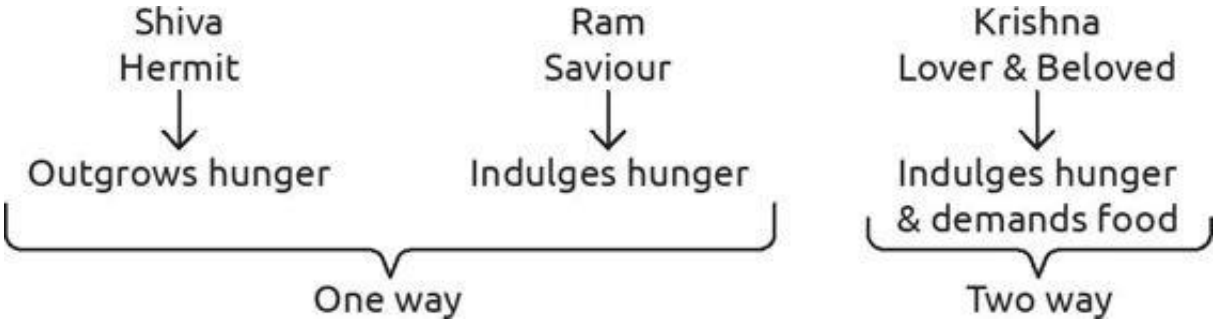
> Arjuna, I am food for the child, exchange for the adult, offering to the dead, medicine to the sick, the chant, the butter, the fire, the libation.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 9, Verse 16 (paraphrased).*

Then, in another verse, KṚṢṆA becomes the recipient of the output.

> Arjuna, offerings made with affection to other deities eventually reach me. I am the recipient of all libations. Most do not

recognize me, and so falter.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 9, verses 23 and 24 (paraphrased).*

Rāma may be the saviour of the downtrodden (patita-pavana), stoically bearing the burden of royal responsibilities and suffering personal tragedy, but KṚṢṆA is also a lover. He gives and receives. He is not complete without Rādhā. In Rādhā-bhakti, the jiva-ātmā may seek param-ātmā in the forest and dance around him, but KṚṢṆA also yearns for her, filling the forest with his lovelorn chant, 'Radhe! Radhe!' And while Sitā and Rāma are separated by social laws and remain heartbroken in separation, KṚṢṆA and Rādhā move on with their respective lives—KṚṢṆA always carries Rādhā in his heart, and Rādhā always carries KṚṢṆA in hers. For KṚṢṆA, his time in Gokul may be limited, but his love for Rādhā is limitless.



Hermit, Saviour and Lover

Rādhā, however, is excluded from many KṚṢṆA-bhakti traditions, such as those of Shankardev in Assam and the Mahanubhav panth of ChakRādhāra Swami in Maharashtra. There is no Rādhā image in most major temples of KṚṢṆA outside the Gangetic plans, such as those in Puri, Pandharpur, Udupi, Guruvayur or Nathdwara. Rādhā's unabashed eroticism and the rather Tantric approach of mutuality was not universally accepted, especially suggestions that Rādhā was older and was KṚṢṆA's aunt (either Nanda's younger sister or married to Yashoda's brother), metaphors that sought to intensify the social inappropriateness, so as to amplify the genuineness of the emotional connection. Preference was given to the nameless milkmaids of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa whose love (prema) is seen as pure, uncontaminated by eroticism (Kāma). Or the entire

Bhāgavata lore came to be dominated by Yashoda, whose maternal love is not as discomforting as Rādhā's love.

For centuries, the devadasis of Hindu temples sang the song of the cowherd ('Gītā Govinda') that describes the intense emotions of KṚṢṆA and Rādhā revealed secretly, at night, outside the village, in the forest. The voice of the devadasis was silenced in the early twentieth century as they were deemed prostitutes. Greater value was placed on the Hindu monastic order that preferred the celibate Hanuman and the song of Bhagavān (Bhagavad Gītā).

Shifts in Bhakti Literature

The Gītā speaks of bhakti as devotion, with Bhagavān occupying a higher position and the devotee submitting to him. However, in Chapter 18, Verse 65, he does refer to Arjuna as 'one very dear to me' (priyo-si-me), indicating love. Gītā Govinda wipes out the hierarchy and transforms bhakti into affection. In it, KṚṢṆA begs Rādhā to place her feet on his head to cure him of the poison of longing, lines that, legend has it, Jayadeva himself heSitāted to write, but KṚṢṆA wrote for him, thus indicating the power of love.

Sometimes, you can see more than me, but you pretend to know less so that I don't feel intimidated by you. I do the same for you. We do not feel superior when the other is vulnerable; or inferior when we feel helpless. This is what sustains our relationship.

13.
You and I have no control

As the mind expands, you and I will accept how helpless we really are, how limited our control over the world is. We will discover how every organism has little control over his or her own capabilities and capacities that are dependent on their natural material tendencies, or **guna**, which in turn is shaped by karma. It will dawn on us that **we are not agents who can change the world**, **we are merely instruments of the world, that is constantly changing**. In this chapter we shall explore the three guna. From here onwards, the **conversation becomes less emotional and more intellectual**: we venture from bhakti yoga to gyāna yoga as we understand the role of insecurity and identity in shaping our choice of action. KṚṢṆA elaborates on the guna in chapters 14, 17 and 18 of The Gītā.

In Chapter 3, Arjuna speaks of the inability to control the mind.

KṚṢṆA, how is it that despite unwillingness, humans do bad things? — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, Verse 36 (paraphrased).*

He was perhaps thinking of his eldest brother, the upright Yudhishthira, who could not stop himself from gambling away their kingdom, his brothers, their wife and even himself. Or perhaps he was thinking of his elder brother, the mighty Bhima, who could not stop himself from killing Kichaka, the lout who tried to abuse Draupadi while they were hiding disguised as servants in the palace of Viraṭa, despite Yudhishthira's express instructions to resist every urge to reveal their secret identities, for if any Pāṅdava was recognized before the end of the stipulated period, they would have to go back into exile for another thirteen years. Or perhaps he was wondering why his grand-uncle Bhisma and tutor Droṇa were fighting on the Kauravas' side. KṚṢṆA attributes this inability to guna, the tendency of matter.

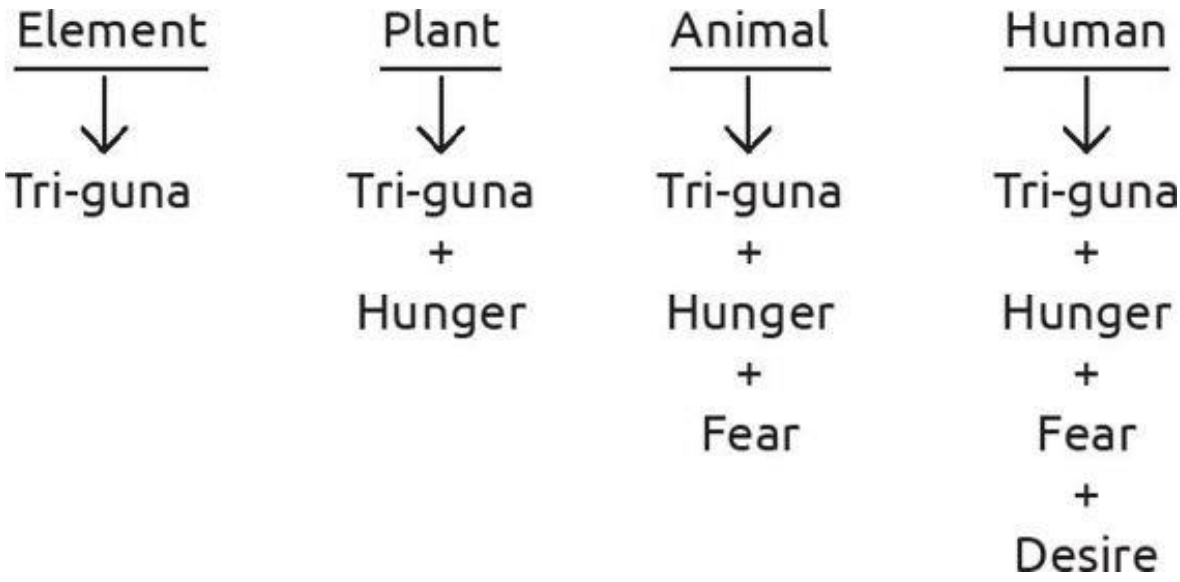
> Arjuna, in your conceit you may declare that you do not want to fight but your nature will compel you to do so, shattering all resolve. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, verses 59 and 60 (paraphrased).*

KṚṢṆA mentions guna early in his discourse in Chapter 2 of The Gītā, but elaborates on it only later in chapters 14, 17 and 18. In between, he takes Arjuna on a detour: the inner journey of discovering the divine nature of dehi. This exploration of Bhagavān and bhakti in the middle third portion of The Gītā marks an acknowledgement of the role emotion plays in cognition. Unless the heart feels secure, the head will not accept the reality revealed by darśan: the reality that humans are helpless before the force of nature, that karma determines the circumstances of our life and guna determines the personality of people around us. We can, at best, understand these, but we cannot control them. Attempts at control only contribute to inescapable and often dreadful consequences that haunt us lifetime after lifetime, generation after generation.

> Arjuna, mind and matter have always existed and from tendencies of matter all forms that exist have come into being. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, Verse 19 (paraphrased).*

Darśan reveals that humans are propelled by desire, animals by fear, plants by hunger, but what eventually manifests depends on the guna that constitutes each individual. Even elements and minerals that have no internal or external drive, no hunger or fear, are continuously transforming because of guna. Guna is what causes clouds to expand, temperatures to shift, rivers to cascade, volcanoes to explode, the sun to rise and set, tides to ebb and flow and winds to blow even when there is no life around. Guna is the nature of nature, the root of its diversity and dynamism. The ātmā within observes the dance of guna.

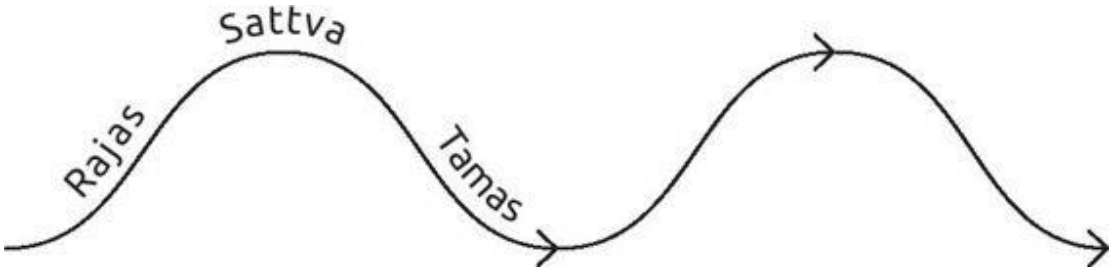
> Arjuna, the truly wise can see that restless nature is the agent, not the immortal one within, but all diverse forms depend on, and emanate from, that one.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, verses 29 and 30 (paraphrased).*



Guna Underlies All Actions

The guna are three (tri-guna): tamas, rajas and sattva. The tendency towards inertia comes from tamas guna, the tendency towards activity from rajas guna and the tendency towards balance from sattva guna. The three guna cannot exist without the other. They are like three phases of a wave: tamas being the movement downwards towards the nadir, rajas being the movement upwards

towards the crest and sattva being the balance, the point at which there is a pause.



Tri-guna as Parts of a Wave

In the elements, tamas guna dominates, which is why they have a tendency towards inertia, unless acted upon by an external force (first law of thermodynamics). **In plants and animals, rajas guna dominates, which is why they grow and run to overcome hunger and fear in order to survive**. In **humans, the sattva guna dominates, which is why only humans are able to trust and care for strangers, empathize and exchange**. But it does not mean that all humans are sattvik. While humans have a strong sattvik component compared to animals, plants and minerals, amongst humans there is a differential distribution of all three guna.

> Arjuna, **when sattva shines through all body gates, there is happiness and understanding**; **when rajas shines through, there is greed, restlessness and lust**; **when tamas shines through, there is confusion and indolence**. At the time of death, if sattva dominates, rebirth takes place in happy and knowledgeable realms; if rajas dominates, rebirth takes place in action-filled realms; if tamas dominates, rebirth takes place in lost, decaying realms. **From sattva comes knowledge, from rajas desire and from tamas ignorance**. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 14, verses 11 to 17 (paraphrased).*

Guna impact not just matter but also the mind. Thus, thought and emotions also display the three tendencies. Therefore some people are lazy followers, some are driven leaders who want to change the world and some decide when to follow and when to lead, and know that the world can be changed only cosmetically with

technology, but not in essence, at a psychological level. Tamas guna stops us from thinking, so we follow the trend. Rajas guna stops us from trusting anyone but ourselves. Sattva guna makes us care for those who are frightened, intimidated by the diverse and dynamic reality of the world.

Different guna dominate at different times. Tamas guna is dominant in a child who follows the adult parent. Rajas guna is dominant in a doubting, fiercely independent, energetic youth who strives to make his own path. Sattva guna is dominant in the mature, who understand when to be silent and when to speak, when to follow and when to lead.

The guna can be seen literally or metaphorically. They explain the diversity of nature, the diversity of ecosystems, plants, animals and humans, the diversity displayed by each living creature in various stages of his or her life. When we react unconsciously or involuntarily, unaware or unable to control our impulses, we are being governed by our guna. Guna results in karma and karma creates guna. This creates the fluid material world: the complex canvas of our existence.

> Arjuna, there is none born on earth or in heaven who is free of the influence of the three tendencies. —*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, Verse 40 (paraphrased).*

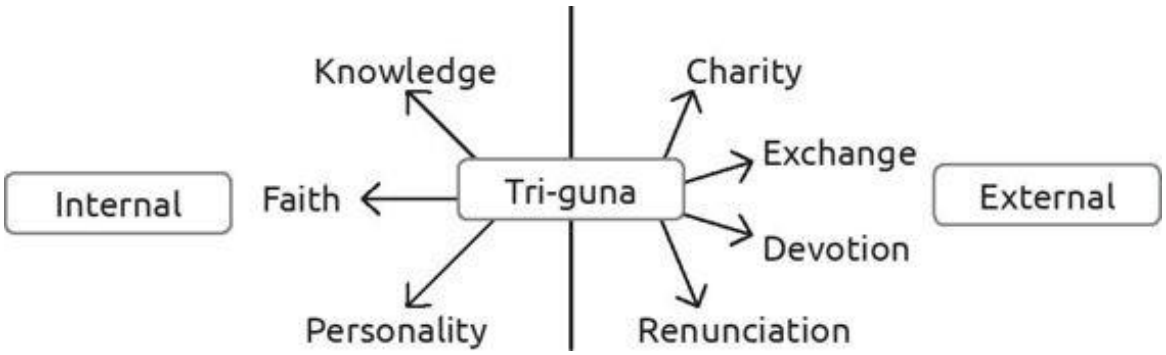
Chapter 17 informs us how the three guna can express themselves as external activities: faith (shraddha), food (ahara), exchange (yagna), austerity (tapasya) and charity (dāna). In tamas, the tendency is to be lazy and confused, and so there is mimicry of the other. In rajas, the tendency is to achieve, dominate and impress, and so there is initiative and aggression towards the other. In sattva, the tendency is to understand and be happy, and so there is gentleness and affection for the other.

> Arjuna, everyone's faith is in line with their nature. They are what they believe. The satvik worship those who give on getting; the rajasik worship hoarders and grabbers; the tamasik worship ghosts. Worship need not be based on scriptures, and can

involve harrowing penance and torture for self-aggrandizement, hypocrisy and passion. Different is the food we like. Different is also the reason for exchanging, being austere or charitable.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 17, verses 4 to 7 (paraphrased).*

Chapter 18 takes things further and classifies even internal aspects of our being, from knowledge to activity to personality to intelligence to willpower to happiness, to the three guna. Each time, tamas involves backward movement and no thought, rajas involves forward movement with self-absorbed thought and sattva involves appropriate movement, forward or backward, taking even the other into consideration.

Arjuna, the tamasik gives up action fooled by others; the rajasik gives up action in fear; the sattvik never gives up action, only the fruits of action, doing not just the nice, shunning not the nasty.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, verses 7 to 10 (paraphrased).*



Tri-guna Within and Without

In Chapter 18, KṚṢṆA attributes human aptitude and talent (Varṇa) to the guna.

Arjuna, it is these tendencies that create the four aptitudes: scholarship, leadership, entrepreneurship and servitude.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, verses 41 to 44 (paraphrased).*

Our talents come from our guna. This does not mean that every talent can be mapped to a particular guna. It does not mean that scholarship comes from sattva guna, or leadership and

entrepreneurship come from rajas guna or servitude comes from sattva guna. It means that the three guna, in different proportions, manifest as scholarship, leadership, entrepreneurship and servitude. We will find scholars who are rajasik, sattvik or tamasik; leaders who are rajasik, sattvik or tamasik; entrepreneurs who are rajasik, sattvik or tamasik; servants who are rajasik, sattvik or tamasik.

		Tendencies (guna)		
		Tamasik	Rajasik	Sattvik
Talent (varna)	Intellectual	✓	✓	✓
	Managerial	✓	✓	✓
	Entrepreneurial	✓	✓	✓
	Service provider	✓	✓	✓

Mapping Varṇa to Guna

From around 2,000 years ago, we find in Indian society a discomfort with fluidity and a great desire to fix things with rules. Genetic studies have shown us that India's infamous caste system, which began as professional guilds, became increasingly rigid from this time onwards. This was the time when the Manu Smriti and other such books, that reduced dharma to a set of rules (niti) and traditions (riti), came to be written. Rules were aimed to create predictability and so greater value was placed on gender and lineage, than talent. Communities (jātī) started following a particular profession that maintained their fidelity by insisting that the sons follow the father's trade and daughters not marry outside the community. The Manu Smriti mapped these jātīs to the Varṇas: thus it was assumed that children of priests would be scholars, children of kings would be leaders, children of traders would be entrepreneurs and children of servants would be servile. Further, these Varṇas were mapped to guna: Brāhmaṇa jātī was mapped to sattva guna, Kśatrīya jātī and Vaiśya jātī to rajas guna and Shudra jātī to tamas guna.

The Manu Smriti, and other such law books, are more political and prejudiced than accurate, for every community has members of all three guna. And in every community there will be those who think, those who get things done, those who calculate and those who follow. The Manu Smriti reveals the human attempt to control the world and make nature predictable by forcing people to follow the vocation of their fathers. It is all about trying to fix a fluid world, a futile effort according to The Gītā.

The Mahābhārata, for example, speaks of Karṇa, whose talent as archer overrides the social demand that he follow his father's vocation and stay a charioteer. No matter how hard we try to fix things, nature will break all boundaries and rules. Varṇa will always overshadow jātī. Duryodhana appreciates Karṇa's talent while Draupadi, the Pāṅdavas, Bhisma and Droṇa reject and mock Karṇa. Duryodhana sees in him an opportunity and the rest see him as a threat. Nobody is a yogi. They are either attracted (raga) or repelled (dvesha) by him. No one sees Karṇa for himself, beyond his Varṇa and jātī, that he cannot stop himself from pursuing his passion for archery, logical arguments notwithstanding, for such is the power of one's guna.

		Tendencies (guna)		
		Tamasik	Rajasik	Sattvik
Classical categories of caste (jati)	Brahmin	✓	✓	✓
	Kshatriya	✓	✓	✓
	Vaishya	✓	✓	✓
	Shudra	✓	✓	✓

Mapping Jātī to Guna

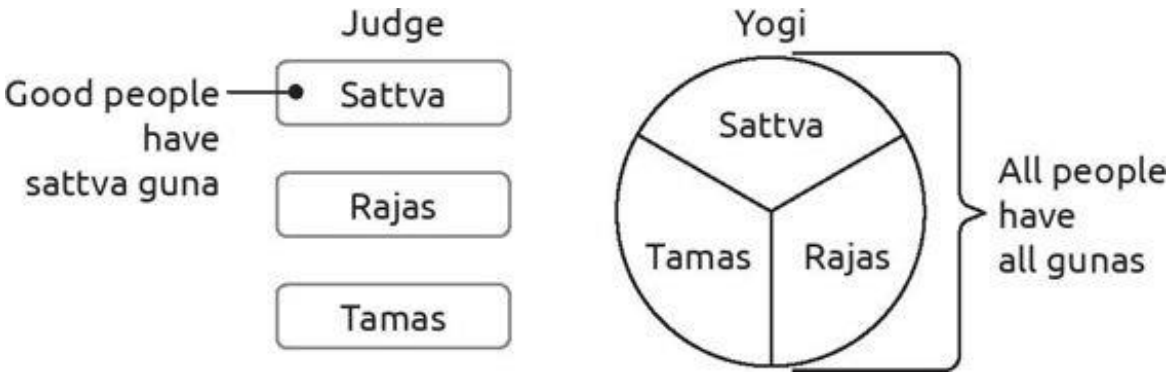
Likewise, marriage rules are designed to regulate the desires of humanity. But guna will force us to challenge these rules. Thus in RāMāyāṇa, though married, Paraśurāma's mother Renukā desires Kartaviryarjuna; Gautama's wife Ahalyā desires Indra; and Rāvaṇa's

sister Surpanakhā desires Rāma. Renukā is beheaded, Ahalyā turned to stone and Surpanakhā's nose is cut off. None of these brutal actions stops nature from changing its course. **Guna will continuously make people take decisions that even their mind opposes**. (Then what is choice left, to change?)

A judge tends to see sattva guna as superior and tamas guna as inferior, but the observer knows **that sattva guna is the most desirable simply because it is least threatening while tamas guna is least desirable because it is burdensome**. **Rajas guna is glamorous and seductive, for it is associated with ambition and determination and is seen as far more proactive**, **compared to the reactive sattva guna**.

The observer also distinguishes the sattvika from the yogi—the sattvika's tranquillity is effortless and inborn, while the yogi's tranquillity is the outcome of learning and effort. The yogi pays attention to the other, which distinguishes him from the sattvika.

> 'Arjuna, the wise observer does not hate what is there and seek what is not there amidst light or activity or delusion. He knows that it is the tendencies of matter at work, and so is always indifferent to the shifts around, always at peace, amidst pleasure and pain, gold or clay, when loved or unloved, when treated as friend or foe, in honour or disgrace, if praised or blamed.'—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 14, verses 22 to 25 (paraphrased).*



Views on Tri-guna

KṚṢṆA points to rajas guna for all desires (Kāma) and anger (krodha); tamas guna for all laziness and confusion; sattva guna for a balanced, responsible view. The moment we say that the agent is the guna, we don't take credit or blame, nor do we give credit or blame. In other words, we don't judge. We are able to connect with ātmā. The moment we judge, attribute agency to others or ourselves, for fortune or misfortune, we disconnect from ātmā and give rise to AHAM. In aham, we don't accept the power of guna and blame people for our problems. We then seek leaders if we are tamasika, followers if we are rajasika or simply disconnect if we are sattvika.

> Arjuna, the lord resides in everyone's hearts, deluding them with a sense of control while making them go round and round like cogs in a wheel. —*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, Verse 61 (paraphrased).*

A yogi accepts that the stubbornness of Rāvaṇa in the RāMāyāṇa, Kansa in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and Duryodhana in the Mahābhārata are the results of their guna, which is beyond their control. As bhakta, he attributes their behaviour to the games (leela) of Bhagavān. This makes it easier to make even the undesirable part of a yagna, rather than simply exclude them.

Threat		
	Tamas	'I will do as others do.'
	Rajas	'I will destroy him.'
	Sattva	'I will withdraw from him.'
	Yogi	'I will engage with his fears and hungers.'

Response of Different People to Villains

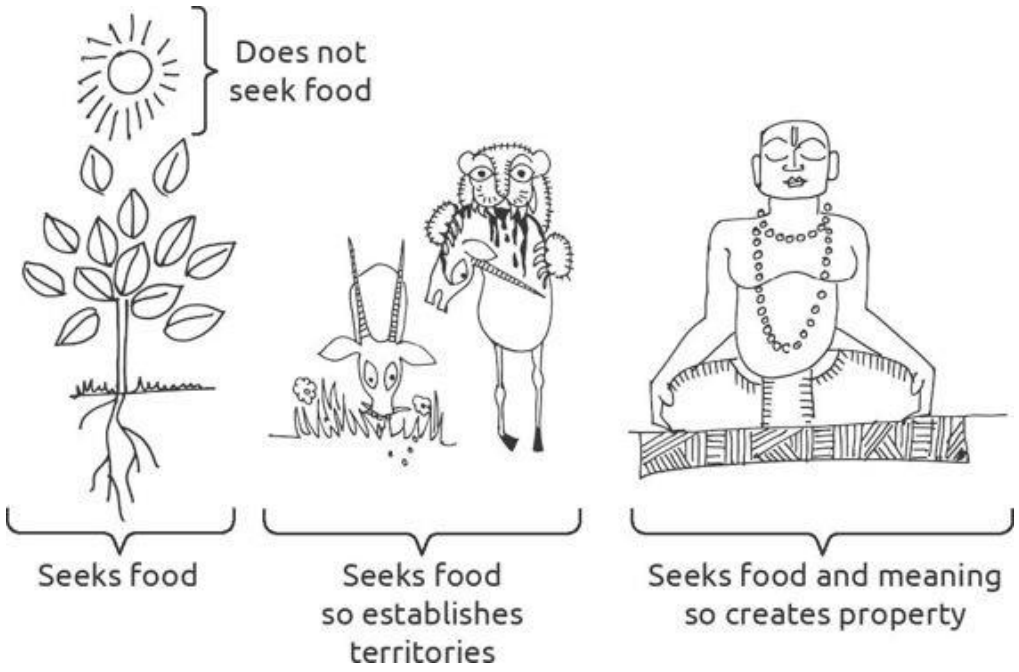
We are all a masala box of guna, with one guna dominating at different times. We can all be lazy, assertive, detached or engaged. Yoga makes us aware of the guna at work.

14.
You and I value property

Guna may determine our body and our personality. Karma may determine the circumstances of our life. But humans have the power to create their own identity by creating and claiming property, or **kśetra**. Society values people more as proprietors, than as residents of the body, for property is visible and measurable. As a result, 'mine' becomes more important than 'me'. The gaze shifts from the inside to the outside. KṚṢṆA speaks of kśetra before he speaks of the tri-guna, in Chapter 13 of The Gītā, but in *My Gītā* kśetra is discussed after guna, as it flows better into the following chapters by introducing us to the social body, the artificial expansion of the body, found only in human society.

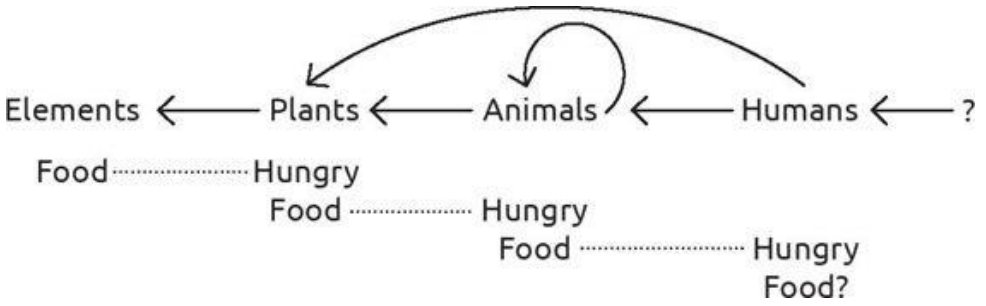
To stay alive, animals need to know the identity of the other: whether the animal around them is a predator (can it eat me?) or prey (can I eat it?); mate (can we produce offspring?) or rival (can it grab my food or mate?). They need to locate the other, and thus themselves, precisely in the food chain and pecking order.

Humans do not have to bother about food chains and pecking order. But we wonder who we are, and about our relationship with those around us. What is our purpose? How are we valued?



Purpose

A thing in nature has value only if it can be consumed as food. The sun, the rain and the earth did not have any value until trees came along and sought sunlight, water and soil as food. Likewise, plants had no value until animals sought them as food. Animals had no value until other animals sought them as food. Who seeks humans as food? Can humans be of value without being consumed?



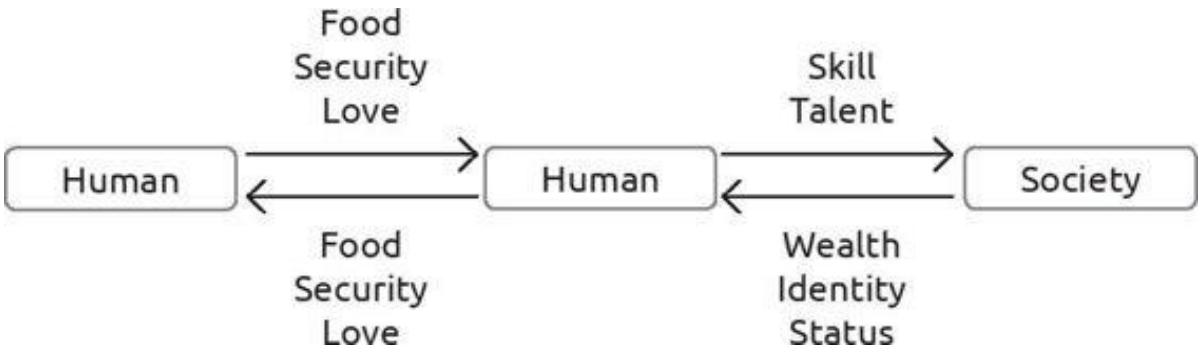
Value Chain = Food Chain

Speculation along these lines led to the composition of the Ṛg Vedic hymn of humanity (puruśa sukta), which speaks of the consumption of man, and the Yajur Vedic ritual of dismemberment of the human-animal (puruśa-medha). Both hymn and ritual were composed a thousand years before the composition of The Gītā. Both can be taken literally or metaphorically. The literal approach

associates them with human sacrifice: this idea appealed to the nineteenth- century European Orientalist notion of exotic India, of the 'noble savage'. The metaphorical approach draws attention to the human ability to give meaning to each other, and nourish each other emotionally and intellectually. In the Upanishads, it is common to equate food (anna) with meaning and identity (ātmā): food is what all living creatures seek; meaning is what only humans seek. The same idea is visualized in Chapter 11 of The Gītā, when Arjuna notices KṚṢṆA's universal form consuming humans.

> KṚṢṆA, I can see the warriors of their side and ours rushing into your mouth, being crushed between your teeth, entering your blazing mouth like rivers running into the ocean. Entire worlds hurry to your mouth to be destroyed, like moths to flame. You devour all the worlds with your many fiery mouths.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 11, verses 26 to 30 (paraphrased).*

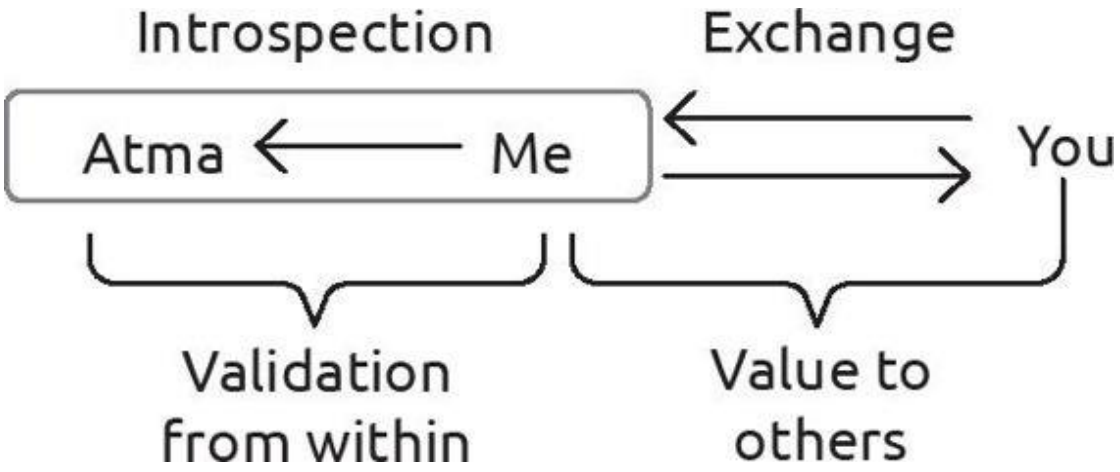
This vision taken literally can be terrifying, as KṚṢṆA appears as a predator, even a villain. But when the blindfold of judgement is removed, Arjuna understands the metaphor: by consuming the Pāṅdavas and Kauravas, KṚṢṆA is giving them value. He is declaring that they nourish him, thus extending the logic. Arjuna realizes that he exists as 'food' for those around him. He brings value to his brothers, to his cousins, to the world at large. They are also 'food' for him. They nourish him, give him value and purpose. This consumption is both material and psychological. Withdrawal from the battle would mean denying the others meaning.



Man as Food

But while KṚṢṆA eats, he is not really hungry. He declares that he is immortal, and so does not fear death, and does not need food. He declares he is infinite, and so he cannot be separated from the other — he is both the eater and the eaten. He eats, not because he is hungry, but to make the other feel valued. And he allows himself to be eaten to nourish the other. In other words, he is **a yogi who does not seek meaning from outside**; he **gets his identity from within**, **from the ātmā**.

> 'Arjuna, I am the ritual, I am the exchange, the offering, the herb, the chant, the butter, the fire, all that is offered.'—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, Verse 24 (paraphrased).*

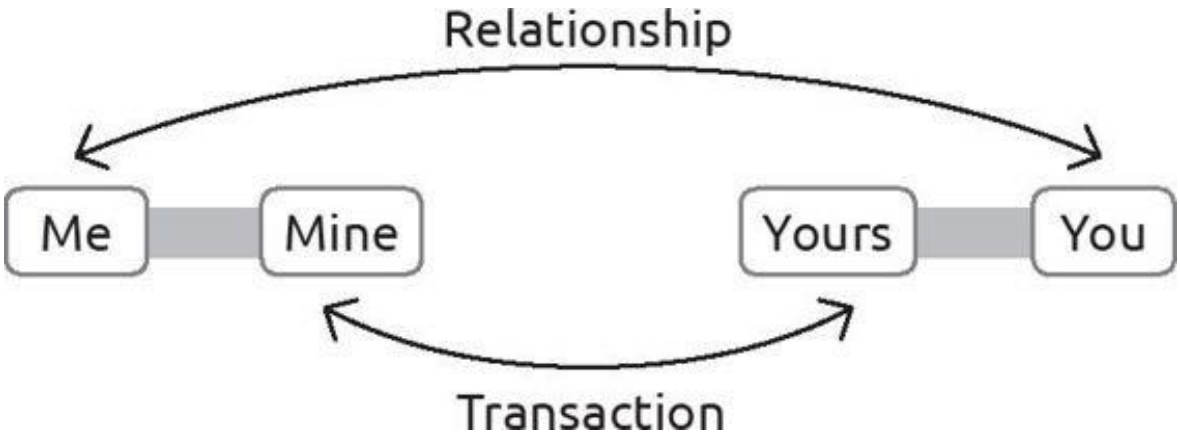


Meaning From Within and Outside

Before the start of the Kuru-kśetra war, the Pāṅdavas and the Kauravas once came to KṚṢṆA for help. KṚṢṆA offered them all that he had: one could have Nārāyaṇi, his fully equipped army, and the other could have Nārāyaṇa, his own unarmed self. The Kauravas chose Nārāyaṇi while Pāṅdavas chose KṚṢṆA. Nārāyaṇi is KṚṢṆA's resources, all that he has. Nārāyaṇa is all that he is. The former is tangible and measurable, and even outlasts death, hence preferred by the Kauravas over the latter.

The Kauravas mimic the behaviour of the asuras in the Purāṇas who prefer Brahma's boons to Brahma. The Kauravas and the asuras seek material nourishment, not emotional or intellectual nourishment. They seek 'his' not 'him'.

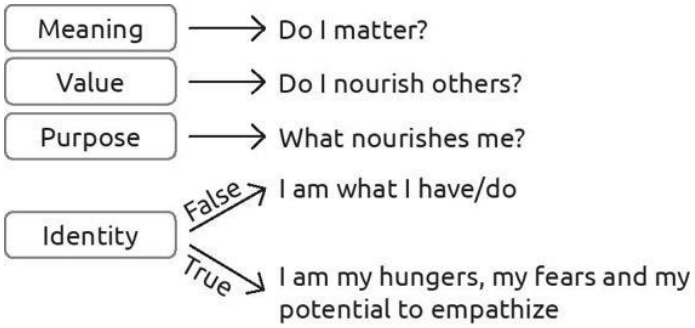
During a yagna, Nārāyaṇi is exchanged: 'mine' becomes 'yours'. If this is done with consideration of the hungers and fears of the Devatā, then the yajamāna has a relationship with the Devatā. If, the yajamāna, is only focussed on his hungers and fears, then it is simply a transaction with the Devatā where more value is given to 'what you have' rather than 'who you are'.



Relationships and Transactions

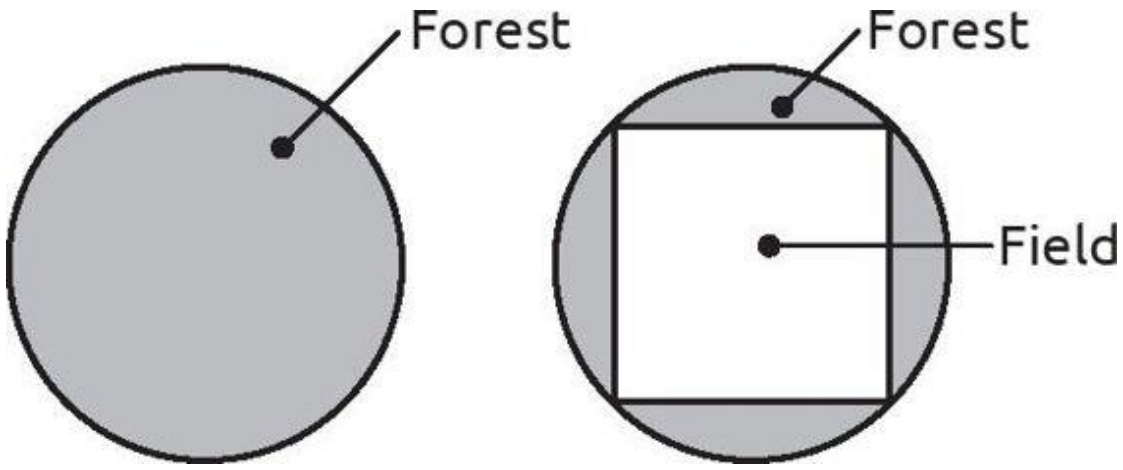
Economists value the Nārāyaṇi called wealth. **Educationists value the Nārāyaṇi called literacy**. **Politicians value the Nārāyaṇi called power**. **Feminists value the Nārāyaṇi called gender**. **Employers value the Nārāyaṇi called skill**. **Physicians and surgeons value the Nārāyaṇi called the body**.

Society is not interested in Nārāyaṇa — what a person is: his hungers, his fears, or his potential. Things matter more than thoughts. Property becomes a substitute for feelings. Hence the purpose of life has become all about acquiring more and more Nārāyaṇi. In The Gītā, the concept of Nārāyaṇi is presented in Chapter 13 as kśetra.



Meaning (artha)

kśetra literally means a farm, a manmade space created by domesticating nature. In nature, there are no farms. Humans turn forest into farms to produce food. They mark out the boundaries, uproot the trees, clear the land, till the soil, sow the seeds, permit growth of crops and get rid of weeds. The farmer protects the farm and the produce fiercely. Born of his effort, he claims ownership of the farm: 'It is mine'. Other humans acknowledge it: 'It is yours.' Thus, the farm becomes his property. The property nourishes him, physically and psychologically. Physically it gives him food. Psychologically it gives him an identity of a farmer. He feels entitled. The property also grants him immortality, since he can bequeath it to his family, who are also his own.



Field versus Farm

In nature, there is no property. There is territory that animals fight over to ensure they have enough food supply. Territories cannot be inherited; they go to the strongest. Properties, however, can be inherited. The son gets the estate, the title and all the accompanying wealth, power and status from the father.

In the RāMāyāṇa, during the forest exile, when Lakshmana draws a line (rekha) around Sitā's hut, he very publicly defines what is Rāma's kśetra. Within the Lakshmana-rekha, Sitā is Rāma's wife; outside she is just a woman for the taking. kśetra thus is an artificial construction, not a natural phenomenon.

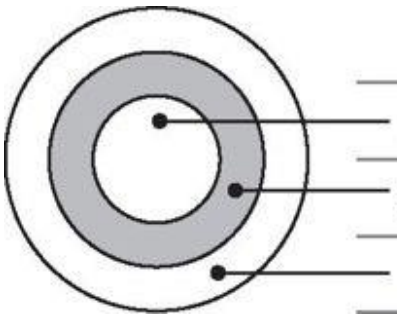
Me and Mine

In Chapter 2, KṚṢṆA speaks of deha and dehi, the body and resident of the body. In Chapter 13, he speaks of kśetra and kśetragna, the property and proprietor. Another word used for kśetragna is kshetri. The resident transforms into the proprietor as the body expands to include titles and estate.

> Arjuna, the wise know the body as a farm and the mind as its farmer. This body, your farm, is constituted by the five elements that make up your flesh, your notion of who you are, your intelligence, your emotions, your sense organs, your response organs and the pastures that your senses graze upon, and all that causes pain and pleasure, attraction and revulsion. — *Bhagavad Gītā, Chapter 13, verses 1 to 6 (paraphrased).*

In the Upanishads, kśetra is seen as the third layer of deha. It is the outermost layer, known as the social layer (karana-sharira). Then comes the physical layer (sthula-sharira) and finally the mental layer (sukshma-sharira). Social body refers to property inherited at birth or earned through effort. Physical body, container of beauty, skills and talent, is the flesh, which is acquired at birth. The mental body comprises our sensations, our feelings and our ideas and, most importantly, how we imagine ourselves. The mental body is the resident-owner, dehi-kśetragna. When the mind outgrows its dependence on kśetra and deha, it discovers ātmā. When we die, the

deha is cremated. We live behind kśetra. The dehi/ kśetragna/ātmā move on to the next life if still dependent on deha and kśetra, else it breaks free entirely from the unending waves of rebirths and re-deaths.



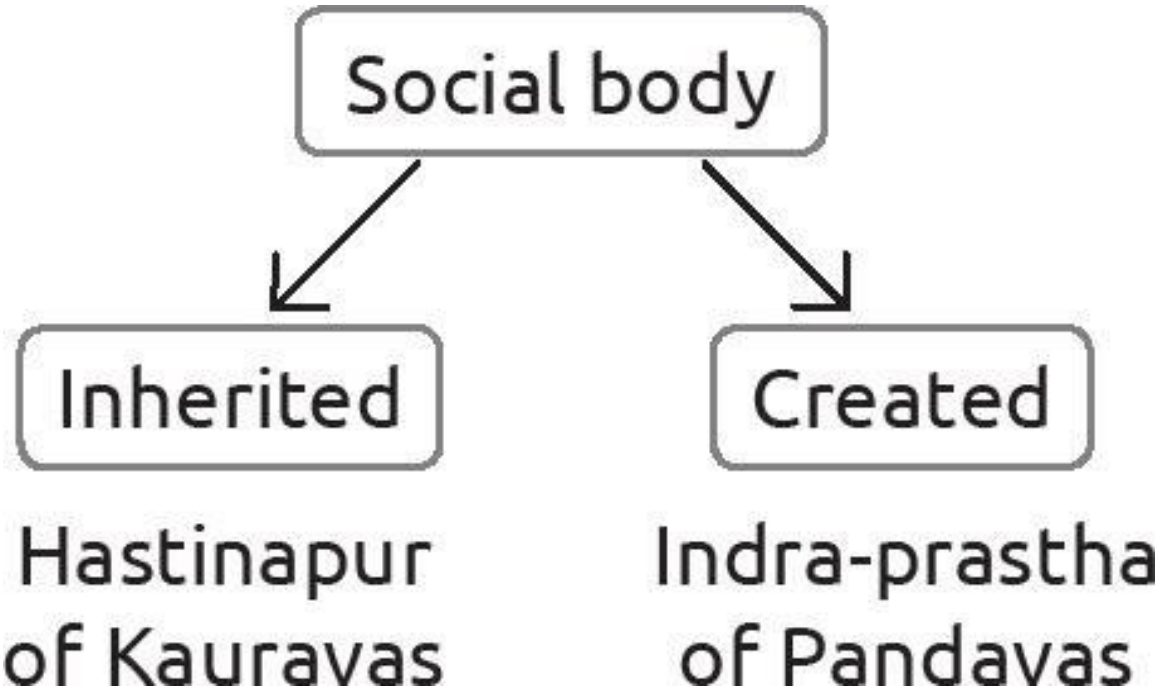
	Karna	Arjuna
Mental body	Ambitious	Insecure
Physical body	Archer	Archer
Social body	Servant	Prince

Three Bodies

In the Mahābhārata, both Arjuna and Karṇa are talented archers. In fact, Karṇa has the distinct advantage of being born with celestial armour and earrings that cling to his body like flesh. But society respects Arjuna more than Karṇa, because Arjuna is seen as a prince of the Kuru clan and legal heir of Hastināpura, while Karṇa is seen as a charioteer's son, even after he is made a warrior and king by Duryodhana who admires his talent with the bow. For society, kśetra is more important than deha. No one cares about dehi.

So much value is given to the external that neither Arjuna nor Karṇa look within for identity. Arjuna derives his identity from his talent (archery), his inherited title (Pāṅdu's son) and the estate he cultivates (Indra-prastha). Karṇa also derives his identity from his talent (archery), but he distances himself from his inherited title (charioteer's son) and strives to earn new titles (Duryodhana's friend) and estates (Anga). Identity based on what we have is aham, not ātmā. The karana-sharira is an outcome of karma—past karma and present karma. What we attract naturally towards us is based on past karma. What we bring forcibly towards us is based on current karma. Arjuna's royal status is based on past karma, as is Karṇa's association with charioteers. Neither of them chose this. It was an accident of birth. Archery is their inborn talent that they inherited and honed with effort. Arjuna's association with Indra-prastha, and Karṇa's association with Anga, are the outcome of effort. Or are they? Were

these properties supposed to come into their lives after a struggle? It is not easy to answer these questions. Karana-sharira remains mysterious. It travels with us from our previous lives into our next lives, gathering impressions of karma, keeping a record of debts that we are obliged to repay.

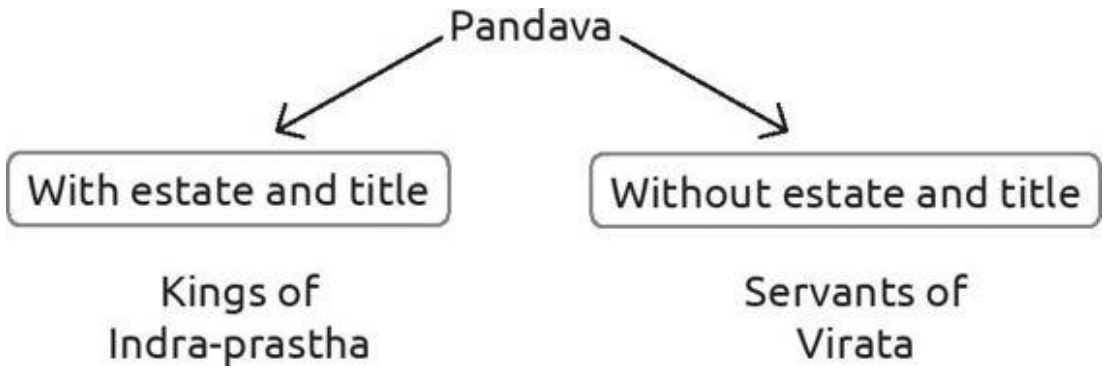


Two Types of Social Bodies

Property and proprietors exist only in culture (sanskriti), not nature (prakriti). The divide between nature and culture, forest and field, is a consistent theme in Hinduism. In the Sama Veda, where hymns of the Ṛg Veda are put to melody, songs are classified into two: songs of the forest (aranya-gana) and songs of the settlement (grama-gana). What applies to the forest does not apply to the settlement: in the forest, the rules of man are meaningless, not so in the settlement. The Pāṅdavas realize this during their exile.

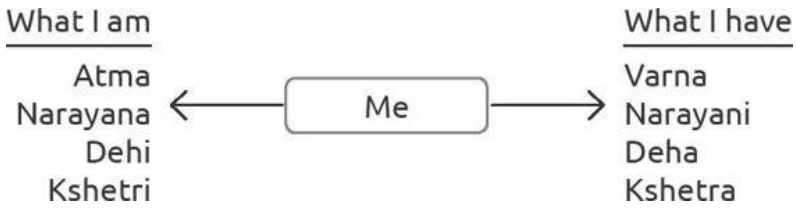
In the forest, Arjuna shoots a wild boar and discovers it has been struck by another arrow, that of a tribal, or kirata. As entitled prince, he claims the boar as his. But the kirata does not recognize him as prince, and demands that the two fight over it like two alpha males fighting over a territory or a mate: the winner takes the prize. In the forest, Arjuna realizes his social body does not matter. Only his strength and skill do.

In the final year of exile, the Pāṅdavas have to hide, keep their identities secret. As per the agreement with the Kauravas, if discovered in this year, they would have to go back to the forest for another twelve years. During this period, they take employment as servants in the palace of Viraṭa, king of Matsya. They discover for the first time what it means to be a servant, when one has nothing to offer other than skills and so become the objects of constant abuse and exploitation.



The Pāṅdavas as Princes and as Servants

Without their titles or estates, the Pāṅdavas had no value. To get back their kśetra from the Kauravas naturally became the purpose of their life. KṚṢṆA's conversation with Arjuna, however, is not to enable this. It is to teach Arjuna that while society may value him for his kśetra, while securing that kśetra for his family should be his purpose as property is vital for his family's survival, he must not derive his identity from property. Identity comes from within, not without: from kshetri, not kśetra, from dehi, not deha.



Source of human meaning

You may value me for what I have and what I do. But I am not what I have or what I do. If you love me, focus on who I am: my hungers and my fears, and my potential to focus on who you are.

15.
You and I compare

Animals and plants do not measure or compare. They fight for as much territory as they need to survive. But humans can measure the size of their property and hence compare. This ability to measure and delimit reality is called **Māyā**. Māyā establishes the structures, divisions and hierarchies of society, in which we locate our identity and the identities of those whom we compare ourselves with. We can qualify these yardsticks as unwanted illusions, or necessary delusions, that imagination can easily overturn. While the word Māyā is used a lot in the Vedas and The Gītā in the sense of the magical powers of the human mind, its role in measurement and construction of human perception was elaborated much later in the Vedantic tradition that flowered about a thousand years ago.

kśetra demands clear demarcation of what is mine and what is yours. In the Mahābhārata, the Kauravas do not consider the Pāṅdavas to be theirs, which is why Dhṛtarāṣṭrarefers to his sons as ‘mine’, and refers to his nephews not as his brother’s sons but merely as ‘Pāṅdu’s sons’. He considers both Hastināpura and Indra-prastha as Kuru- kśetra, belonging to the Kauravas, and sees the Pāṅdavas as intruders.

The Pāṅdava brothers consist of two sets of brothers borne by Pāṅdu’s two wives — three sons from Kuṅtī and the twins from Mādrī. During the gambling match, Yudhishthira first gambles away

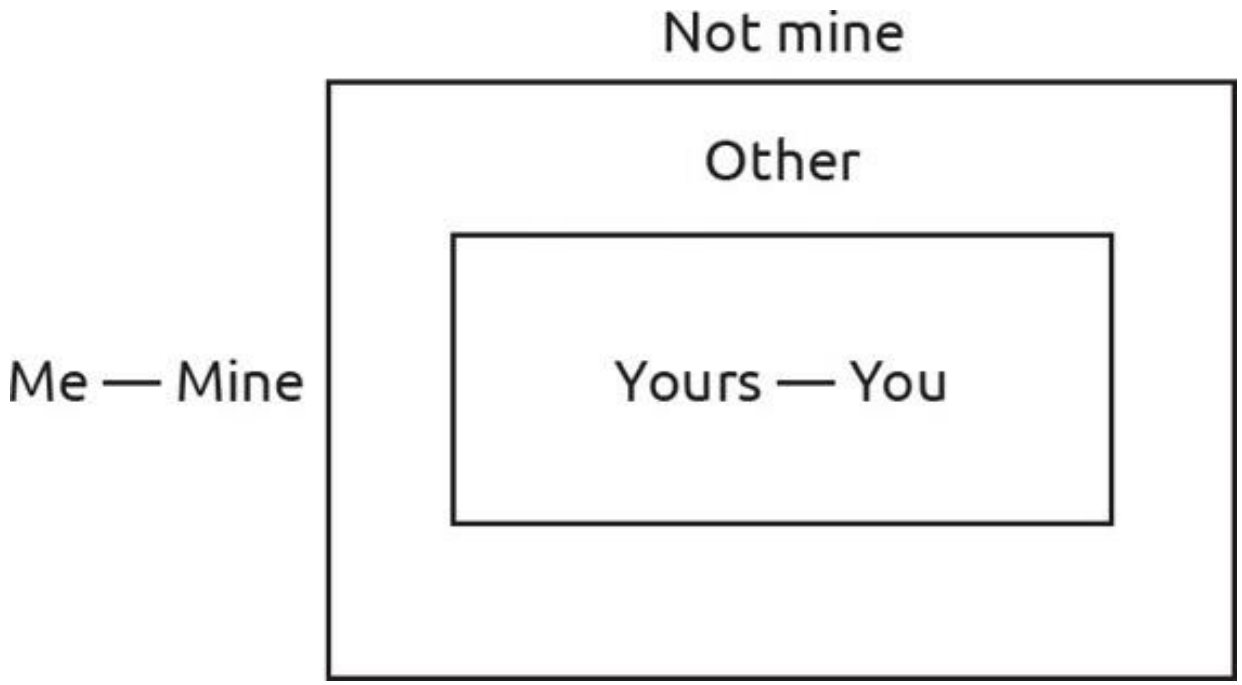
Nakula, the son of Mādrī, indicating that he considers his stepbrother a little less his than Arjuna and Bhima. Later in the forest, when his four brothers die after drinking the water of the poisoned lake, and he is given the option of bringing only one of his brothers back, he chooses Nakula over Kuṅtī's sons, indicating a shift in mindset: he realizes that a good king is one who expands his boundaries and turns even half-brothers, cousins and strangers into relatives.

In the Bhāgavata, KṚṢṆA never talks to BalaRāmaa as his half-brother. There is no division between them. He does not treat his biological parents, Devaki and Vasudeva, as different from his foster parents, Yashoda and Nanda. In the Mahābhārata, however, Karṇa never identifies himself with his foster parents, as they are charioteers and he aspires to be an archer.

This ability to create a boundary, and shift boundaries, between what I consider mine and what I do not consider mine comes from Māyā, the unique human ability to measure, delimit and apportion. The word Māyā is commonly translated as illusion, or delusion, but its root 'ma' means to 'to measure'. Māyā is the delusion when we look at the world through the filter of measurement.

Measurement helps us to label and categorize all things around us in order to make sense of the world. We organize the world into understandable units, such as the periodic table of all elements in chemistry, or the various taxonomies of plants and animals and diseases in biology. Measurement is key to science, to understanding nature. However, with measurement also comes judgement — we not only classify, we also compare, create hierarchies, hence compete. This gives rise to conflict.

The kśetragna cannot be compared to anything, as it is infinite and immortal. The ātmā within you is the same as the ātmā within me. But if you and I are not in touch with our ātmā, and we do not empathize with each other's hungers and fears and potential, we will compare our respective kśetras to locate ourselves in a hierarchy and give ourselves an identity.



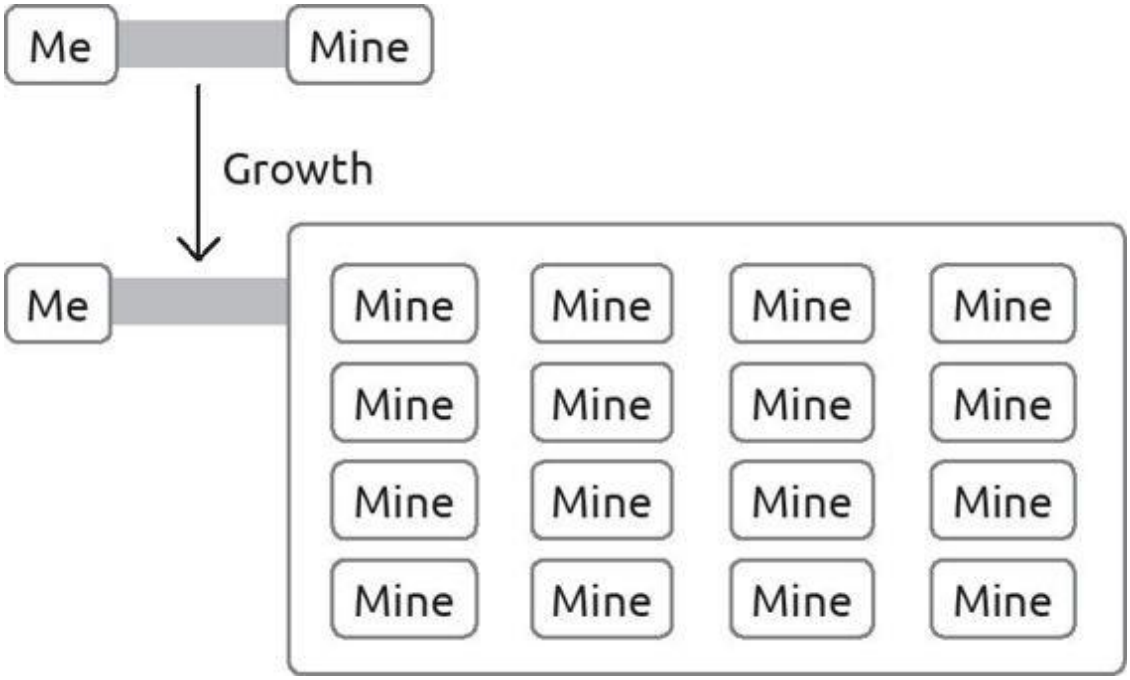
Mine and Not Mine

When value comes from what I have, then the more I have, the more valuable I become. And so I want to ensure that I have more than you. That is why in the RāMāyāṇa, conflict begins with comparison. Kaikeyi hates being junior queen. So she wants her husband, Dasharatha, king of Ayodhyā, to crown her son as heir, so that as queen mother she can dominate over the senior queen, KauŚalya.

The Mahābhārata also speaks of conflict generated by comparison. Pāṅdu, king of Hastināpura, retires to the forest following a curse that prevents him from mating with his wives and fathering children. His two wives, Kuṅtī and Mādrī, follow him to the forest and Kuṅtī tells him of a way to bypass the curse. 'I have a mantra by which I can invoke a deva and compel him to give me a child.' Pāṅdu does not use this way out until he hears that Gāṅdhārī, the blindfolded wife of his blind elder brother, who is now regent of Hastināpura, is pregnant. The competitive spirit kicks in. He tells Kuṅtī to take advantage of her mantra. She calls upon Yama, Vayu and Indra and begets Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna. Pāṅdu asks for more sons, but Kuṅtī says she cannot use the mantra more than three times. So Pāṅdu begs her to share it with his second wife, Mādrī. Kuṅtī does

as advised but is quite irritated when, using one mantra, Mādrī begets two children by simply calling the Ashwin Kumāras, who always come in a pair. She refuses to give Mādrī the mantra again as she wants to be the mother of more children than Mādrī. On learning of the birth of Pāṅdu's children, Gāṅdhārī is so upset that she gets her midwife to strike her pregnant belly with an iron bar and force the child out. What she delivers instead is a ball of flesh, cold as iron. She divides and transforms this, with the aid of Rishi Vyāsa, to get a hundred sons, ninety-eight more than Mādrī, ninety-seven more than Kuṅtī, to establish her superiority, and hence her husband's.

Humans very instinctively evaluate and compare. In The Gītā, when KṚṢṆA distinguishes between asuras and devas, we position devas as better than asuras. When KṚṢṆA speaks of the three yogas, we wonder which is superior: karma, bhakti or gyāna. When KṚṢṆA speaks of the three guna, our minds position sattva as better than rajas and rajas as better than tamas. When KṚṢṆA speaks of the four Varṇas, we place Brāhmaṇas over Kśatrīyas, Kśatrīyas over Vaiśyas and Vaiśyas over Śudras. This is all because of Māyā.



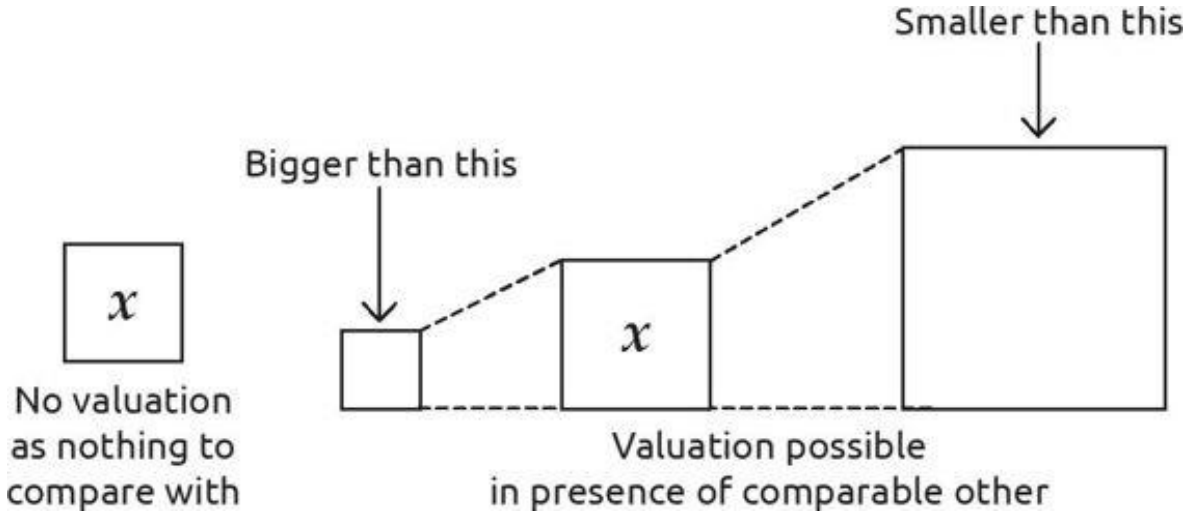
Materialism

In nature, there is a pecking order. But animal domination is not aspirational; it is necessary for survival. Domination ensures they get

access to more food. Humans dominate to grant themselves value and feel good about themselves. Social structures are designed to grant humans identity. They are invariably based on comparsion of the social body, what we have: wealth, knowledge, contacts and skills. Kaikeyi, Gāṅdhārī, Kuṅtī, Pāṅdu, all compete on the basis of their sons. Who has more children? Whose children are stronger, or smarter? Whose son is king? I am better than you because what I have is bigger or better or faster or richer or prettier or cheaper or nicer or nastier than yours. By comparing our titles and estates we Vālīdate ourselves, make ourselves feel significant and relevant.

> Arjuna, the veil of measurements and hierarchies deludes all those who try to make sense of this material world with its three innate tendencies, unless they accept the reality of me, who cannot be measured or compared. Those trapped in this delusion of imagined boundaries behave like demon. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 7, verses 13 to 15 (paraphrased).*

Māyā distracts us from infinity and immortality, from the feeling that the world can continue without us. Māyā makes us feel important.



Measurement

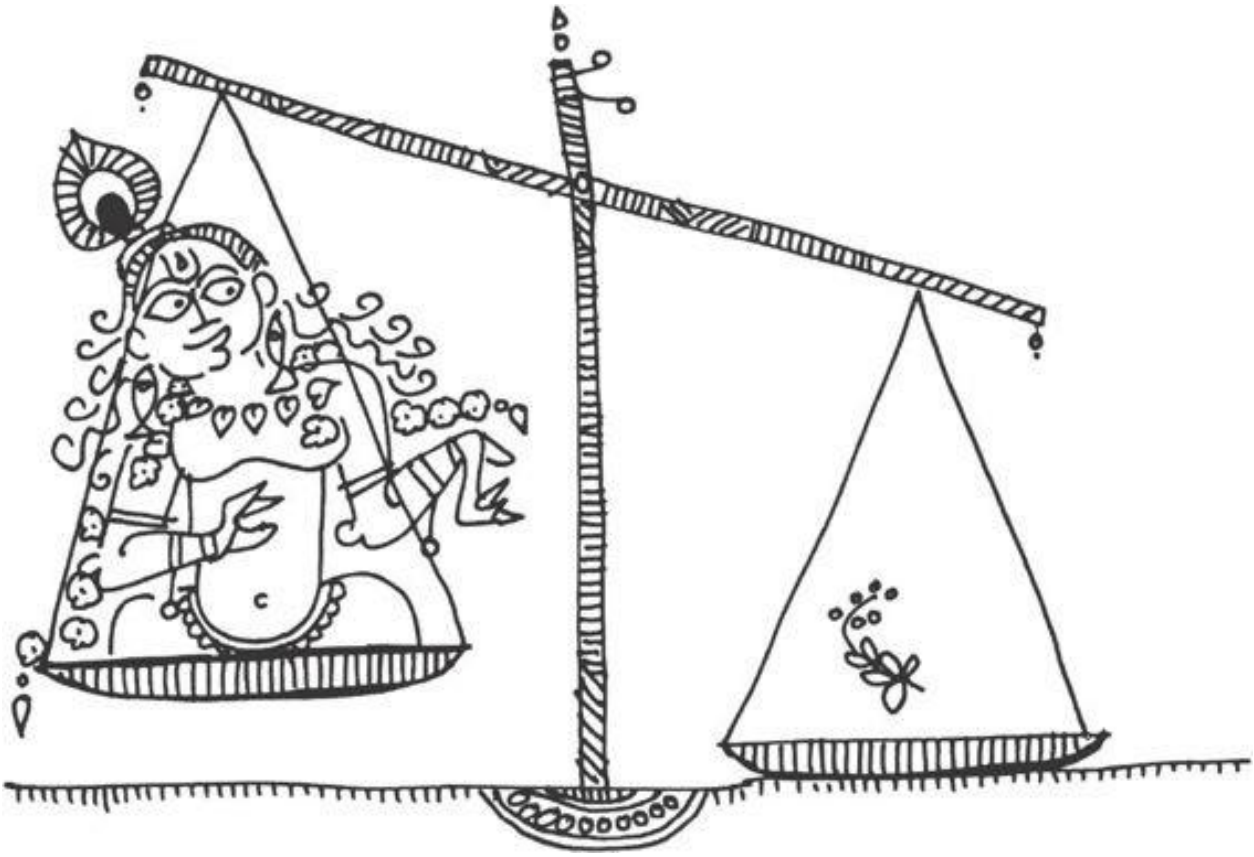
In the Purāṇas, there is a sage called Nārada who travels from house to house comparing people's talents, titles and estates: his wife is more beautiful, his son is more talented, his daughter is married to a richer man, he has more followers, his kingdom is larger, she has

more jewellery... This comparison evokes feelings of inadequacy and jealousy in people. It fuels ambition and ignites conflicts. Having created the tension, Nārada walks away chanting, 'Nārāyaṇa! Nārāyaṇa!' But no one hears this. They are too consumed by Nārāyaṇi (kśetra) to worry about Nārāyaṇa (kśetragna).

Nārada did not want to marry and produce children. He wanted to be a hermit. This annoyed his father, Brahma, who cursed that Nārada would wander in material reality forever. This is why Nārada spends all his time mocking householders who value themselves on the basis of Nārāyaṇi, rather than paying attention to the Nārāyaṇa within.

Once, Nārada came to Dvārakā and tried to spark a quarrel in KṚṢṆA's house. KṚṢṆA's wives asked him what he wanted. 'I want you to give me your husband,' said the mischievous quarrel-monger. The queens said that they could not give their husband. 'Then give me something that you value as equal or more than him.' The queens agreed. KṚṢṆA was put on a weighing pan and the queens were asked to put something they valued equal to or more than KṚṢṆA on the other pan. Satyabhāmāput all her gold. But it made no difference; KṚṢṆA was heavier. Rukmini then placed a single sprig of tulsi on the pan and declared it to be the symbol of her love for KṚṢṆA. Instantly, the weighing scale titled in her favour and Nārada had to be satisfied, not with Satyabhama's gold but with Rukmini's tulsi sprig, symbol of devotion.

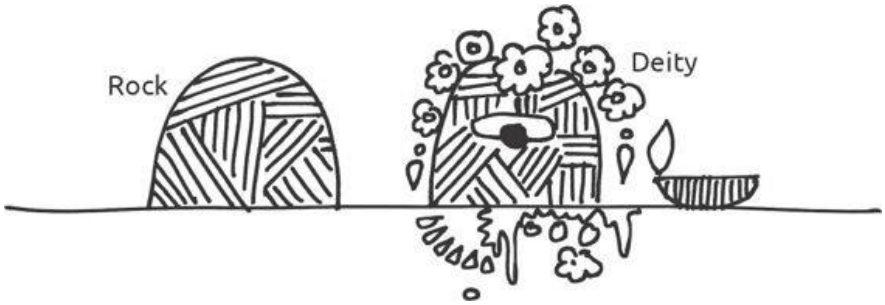
This story does not make logical sense: how can a sprig of tulsi weigh more than KṚṢṆA? But it makes metaphorical sense. When the sprig is given meaning by human imagination, it becomes heavier than anything else. Human imagination can attribute any value to anything. A dog does not differentiate between gold and stone. But humans see gold as money and can turn a rock into a deity. This is the power of imagination. We cannot measure infinity, as Satyabhāmārealized when she tried to weigh KṚṢṆA against gold. But we can lock infinity in a symbol, as Rukmini did.



Measuring KṚṢṆA

> Arjuna, I am infinite and immortal and yet, respecting the ways of nature, I bind myself in finite and mortal measurable existence.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 4, Verse 6 (paraphrased).*

Thus in temples, a rock (pinda, linga) or a fossil (shaligRāmaa) can represent the formless divine. It is our imagination that gives value to things, purpose to an activity and identity to a thing. We can give meaning or wipe it away. That is the power of Māyā. It is the power of Bhagavān bestowed upon us humans. Māyā is often called magic, for it has the power to make the world meaningful, transform every word into a metaphor, every image into a symbol.



Human Ability to Attribute Value

Māyā can divide and separate, cause conflict by comparison. It can also turn anything around, change reality for us, for our mind can give meaning to anything. For example, a hermit may see sex and violence as horrible, while a householder may see sex and violence as necessary, even pleasurable. Māyā can divide the world. It can also unite the world, serve as the glue to a relationship, as we expand our boundaries to include whoever we wish. Duryodhana's inclusion of Karṇa, a charioteer's son, but exclusion of Arjuna, his royal cousin, is a case in point. That is why, in colloquial parlance, Māyā also means 'affection', that which binds relationships together.

When people say in Hindi, 'Sab Māyā hai,' it is commonly translated as 'the world is an illusion or a delusion'. What it means is that the world can be whatever we imagine it to be — valuable or valueless, fuelling ambition or cynicism.

In Vedāṅta there is a popular Sanskrit phrase, 'Jagad mithyā, brahma satya!' It is translated as 'the world is a mirage and only divinity is real'. 'Mithyā' means a measured limited truth created through Māyā. So the phrase can also be translated as 'the material world is an incomplete reality, made complete by imagination and language'. We can manufacture depression and joy in our lives by the way we measure, delimit and apportion the world. The world itself has no intrinsic measurement.

> Arjuna, the wise look at a learned man, an outcaste, a cow, an elephant or a dog with an equal eye. A person who sees equality in all, and is equanimous in all pleasant and unpleasant situations, has realized the divine for the divine is impartial too.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 5, verses 18 to 20 (paraphrased).*

Do you derive your identity by comparing yourself with me? This is Māyā, a necessary delusion without which society cannot function. It can uplift you with inspiration, depress you with jealousy or grant you peace by revealing how different you are from me.

16.
You and I cling

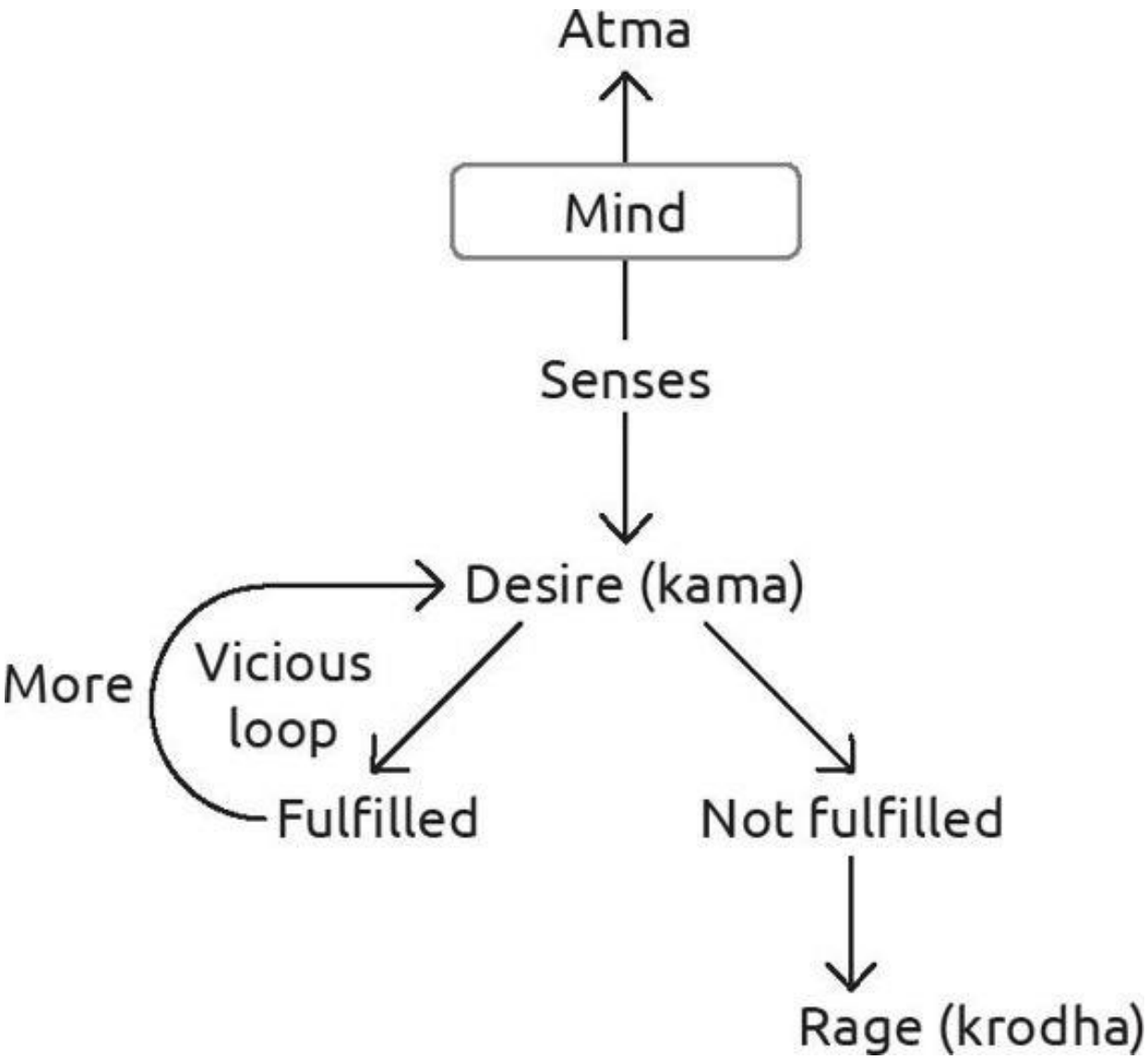
If I am what I own, then I cling to what I have to secure my value in the world. And when you try to take it from me, I feel violated, for my identity is attached to my property. In this chapter we shall explore **moha**, an attachment to boundaries that separates 'mine' from 'not mine' and transforms violence into violation. Violation is psychological violence, that may or may not be associated with physical violence, and the pain is even more searing, for it involves the very inVālīdation of our identity. It is directly proportional to our relationship with all that we consider 'mine'. The idea of attachment flows through The Gītā and plays a key role in Hindu hermit and householder traditions, meriting a separate chapter.

All his life the Buddha spoke about the impermanence of things (anikka, in Pali) and the notion of non-self (anatta, in Pali). Yet, after he died and his body was cremated, the remains of his body (tooth, hair, nails, bones) were collected by his disciples and worshipped as relics placed in stupas. Chaityas were built to enshrine the stupas and around the chaityas came up the vihāras where monks lived. The monks could not let the Buddha slip away into oblivion. They clung to his physical remains, despite his explicit instructions not to do so, seeking permanence of the mortal remains of the teacher who

expounded on life's impermanence. The story goes that when the Buddha was dying, his disciples wept and wondered how they would live without their master. The Buddha then realized that he had hoped to be a raft that takes people across the river of sorrow, but people chose to make him a palanquin that they wanted to carry around and be burdened with forever. He wanted to liberate them; they wanted to fetter themselves.

This is one of the ironies of Buddhism. This irony exists even in Hindu monastic traditions, where monks cling to the bodily remains of their teacher, and rather than cremate the corpse, they mummify it with salt, bury it and build a memorial over it, so that the teacher can be venerated forever. This memorial is called a samādhī, encasing the mortal remains of the hermit who voluntarily gave up his property (kśetra) initially and his body (deha) eventually.

In nature, there are natural forces of attraction and repulsion, even between two objects. Plants and animals are drawn to food and shun threats. Over and above this, humans cling (raga) to property (kśetra) that grants them value in society. We convince ourselves that our social body defines our identity. To be told that our true identity is intangible and immeasurable (kśetragna) seems quite unbelievable, as it can never be proven, only believed. So we cling to goals or rules, to property or relatives, to titles or ideas, and fight over them as animals fight over territory. Animals fight because the survival of their body depends on it. Humans fight as the survival of their identity (aham) depends on it. Clinging is comforting. Insecurity fuels desire (Kāma) for more, and so acquiring more becomes the purpose of life. We get angry (krodha) when we don't get them, become greedy (lobha) once we get them, get attached (moha) to them, become intoxicated with pride (mada) because we possess things, feel jealous of those who have more and insecure around those who have less (matsarya). Material reality thus enchants us and crumples our mind several times over. These are called the six obstacles (arishad-varga) that prevent the mind from expanding, the aham from transforming into ātmā and discovering Bhagavān.



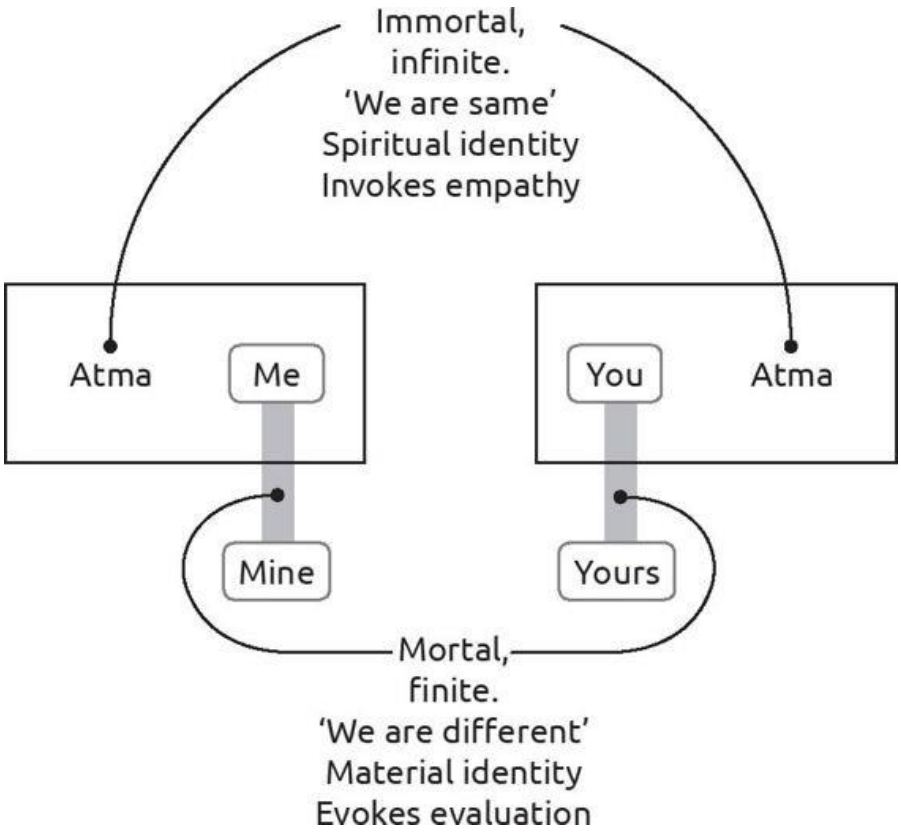
Kāma and Krodha

> Arjuna, from aggressive material tendencies is born desire in the senses, in the heart and the head. Desire is insatiable and if not indulged can result in rage. Desire and rage can block all wisdom, as smoke masks fire, dust masks mirrors and the womb masks a baby.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, verses 37 to 40 (paraphrased).*

We also shun (dvesha) things out of fear. We avoid taking ownership, responsibility or proprietorship in fear. We are terrified of heartbreak, and so refuse to fall in love. We are terrified of failing, and so avoid struggles. We are terrified of the outcome, and so refuse to take any action. We clearly demarcate what is mine and what is not

mine. If attraction of things makes us householders, and revulsion of things makes us hermits, then neither is actually wise, as neither accepts reality. As householders, we wish we expand the mine, sometimes at the cost of yours. As hermits, we want to shun even what is mine and reject all that is yours.

Reality is allowing things to come to us naturally and not seeking things that do not come to us naturally. Wisdom is bearing the fruit we are supposed to bear and not wanting to bear fruit that we cannot bear. Depending on its guna, a tree bears mango fruit; this is not ambition or desire, it is simply realization of potential. If we expect a mango tree to bear apples, then problems start. We do not respect guna. A human being can become a king, a warrior, a merchant, a servant or a poet, depending on his qualities and potential. If we try to change a warrior into a poet because we are revolted by war or attracted to poetry, then we cause tension and suffering. Hinduism therefore does not talk of conversion, only realization of potential. To let our potential be realized without deriving our identity from it, or without denying its existence, is the hallmark of wisdom.



Same or Different

> Arjuna, all beings follow their nature. Even the wise act according to their nature. What is the value of restraint then? Your senses will naturally be drawn to or revolted by things around the body. Do not let them beguile you and distract you from discovering yourself.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, Verses 33 and 34 (paraphrased).*

To want nothing (Śuṅya) is as delusional as to want everything (ananta). The wise want nothing but accept whatever comes their way, letting it pass when it is time to part ways. Rāma is not Rāma because of what he has on account of his birth (royal status) or because of what he has achieved (killing Rāvaṇa). Even without these possessions or achievements, he would still be Rāma.

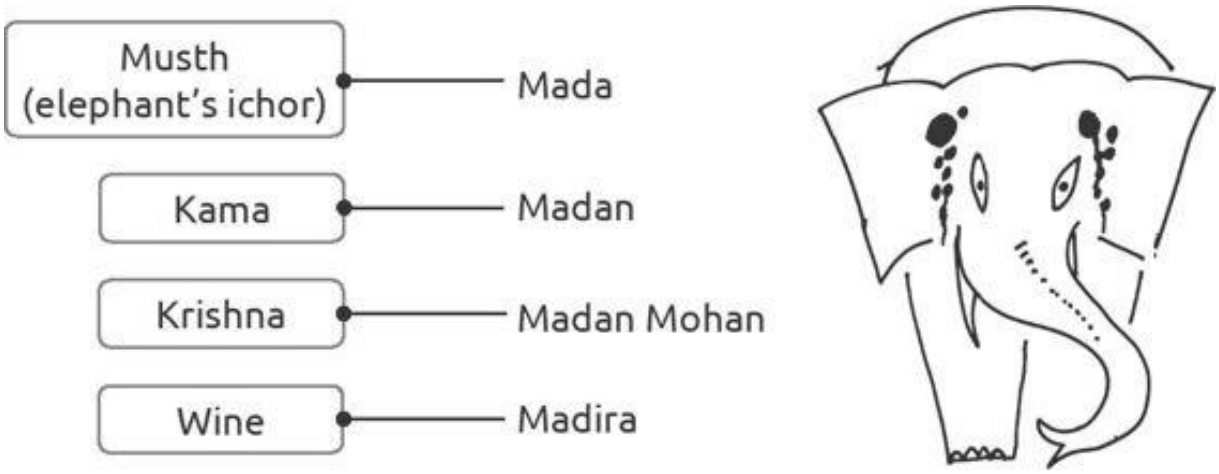
> Arjuna, he who identifies himself with the ātmā engages with the material pleasures without attachment or revulsion, and so is always at peace.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 64 (paraphrased).*

In nature there is violence. In culture there is also violation, for things are not just things, they are markers of identity. Animals do not feel violated when their territories are invaded, or their bodies attacked. They fight back for survival, but there is no morality attached to the violence. Amongst humans, since we identify ourselves through things, an attack on what we consider ours becomes a violation of our identity. This is unique to the human species.

Humans can violate another human by attacking their social body (kśetra) without even touching their physical body (deha). The pain is felt in the mind. The damage is done to the mental body (aham) that gets its value from the external body. Thus, when a passerby scratches our car, we feel hurt. The scratch on the car does not physically hurt us, but we feel emotionally disturbed. We are violated, even though there is no violence, for our car is our property, a part of our social body, that contributes to our identity. Human society conditions us to cling to things around us, gain identity

through relationships, titles and estates. In other words, culture celebrates moha and mada.

Mada refers to the fluid that oozes out of the temples of a sexually aroused bull elephant. This state is called 'musth', when the animal seems fully aroused and intoxicated and can attack anything that comes in its way. It is determined to get what it wants. From mada comes the word madira, which means wine. From mada comes the word Madan, which refers to Kāma, Bhagavān of lust.



Mada: Literal and Metaphorical

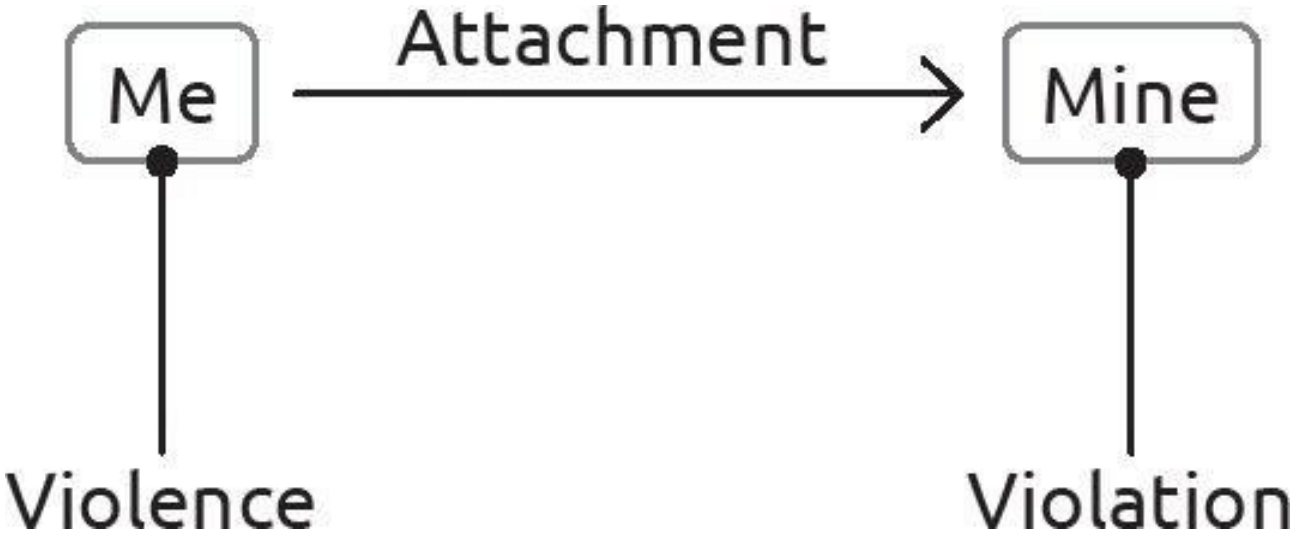
But KṚṢṆA is also called Madan Mohan. He even turns into the enchantress Mohini. Viṣṇū and all his incarnations are associated with a lot of sexual and violent behaviour. But these are distinguished from attachment and revulsion, for Viṣṇū's actions are designed to give value to those around him, not derive value for himself.

In the RāMāyāṇa, Rāvaṇa demonstrates this mada when he refuses to give up Sitā, even after Rāma kills his son, Indrajit, and his brother, KumbhaKarṇa, and Rāma's army of monkeys set Lanka aflame. He clings to Sitā and refuses to turn to Rāma. He finds meaning in Sitā because he sees her as Rāma's property. He wants to violate Rāma by claiming Sitā, whom he views as Rāma's property. Rāma, though, does not see Sitā as his property, but as his responsibility. Rāma, however, does not seek to violate Rāvaṇa; he simply wants to rescue Sitā, for her security is the responsibility of the Raghu clan, into which she was given in marriage. He fights not

because he wants what is 'his' back, but because he refuses to value 'her'. In fact, after the battle is over, he does not expect her to follow him; he offers her a choice to go wherever she wishes and she chooses to return with him to Ayodhyā.

In the Mahābhārata, when KṚṢṆA kills Kansa, he simply kills a man who threatens his life. It is an act of defence, not offence. This is violence, not violation. There is no desire to dominate Kansa, to hurt or humiliate him. However, Jarasandha feels violated, because Kansa to him is his social body, his property, on whom his self-esteem rests. He attacks Mathurā, intent on killing KṚṢṆA, and burns the city to the ground. This act is violation, adharma. Later, with the help of Bhima, KṚṢṆA gets Jarasandha killed. Again the desire is not to hurt or humiliate Jarasandha or dominate him, but to enable Yudhishthira to be king, make him sovereign, something that Jarasandha would not have allowed.

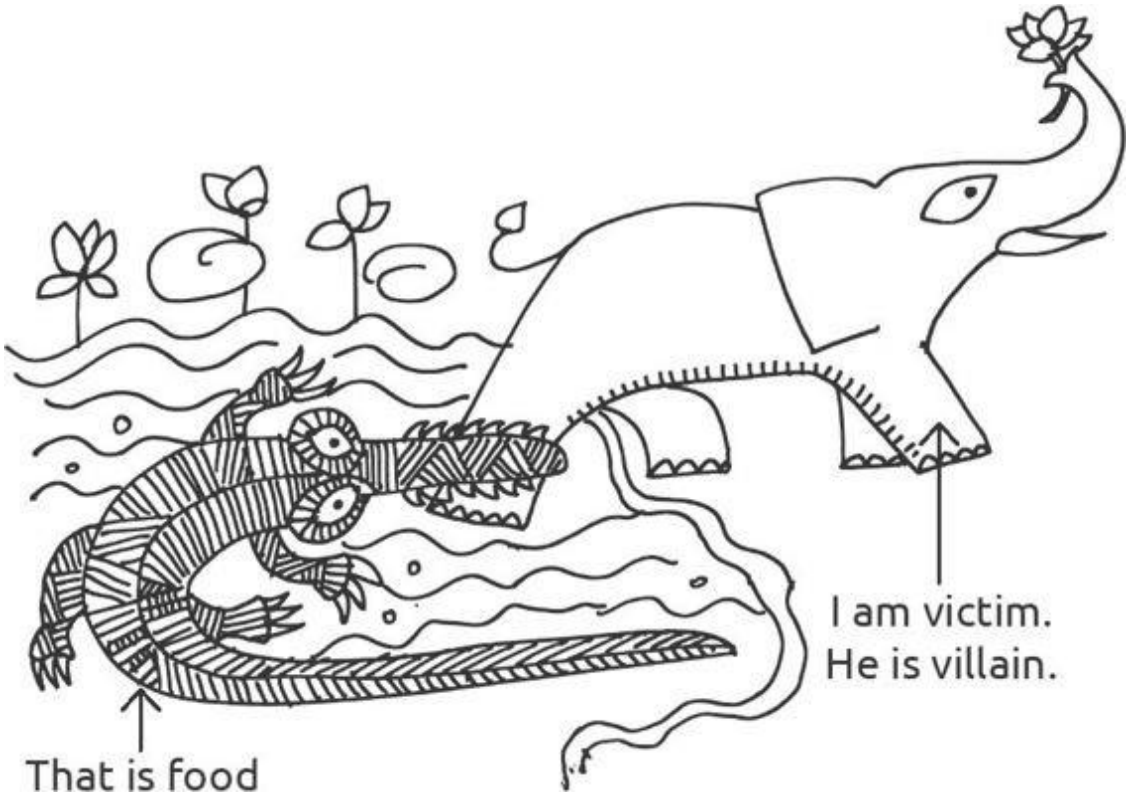
Duryodhana's decision to disrobe Draupadi and not return Pāṅdava land comes from the desire to violate the Pāṅdavas. By violating them, he nourishes his aham. KṚṢṆA does not want Arjuna to do the same. He wants Arjuna to fight without seeking to violate his enemies. He does not indulge Bhima's bloodlust. Violence is unavoidable in the world, for it enables the living to nourish themselves, but violation is nothing but a vulgar indulgence of aham for its own self-aggrandizement.



Violence and Violation

In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, there is the story of Gajendra, the king of elephants, who in a state of 'musth', enters a pond of lotus flowers to sport with his harem of cow elephants, when suddenly a crocodile grabs his leg and drags him underwater. Gajendra tries to escape, but in vain, as no one comes to his rescue. Lost, helpless, he prays to Viṣṇū, who appears and strikes the crocodile away.

This is a metaphor for a mind consumed by passion, seeking gratification in the material world and suddenly finding the world turning against it, becoming even more hostile. The solution is not to fight harder, for that only leads to the crocodile tightening its grip. The solution is to stop fighting and have faith that another force will intervene.



Gajendra Moksha

In the story, Gajendra chooses to see himself as a victim and the crocodile as a villain. If he wins, he will be hailed as a hero and if he loses, he will still be hailed as a martyr who died trying. But the observer can see that the crocodile is no villain: it looks upon

Gajendra either as threat, or as food. The crocodile's violence is not violation. But Gajendra sees it as violation, as he is in a state of mada, seeing himself as the king of elephants, master of all the cow elephants, loved and feared by all, and not as an animal, prey to a predator. Rather than imagining violation, being heroic or acting like a martyr, Vedic wisdom suggests that we recognize Māyā, moha and mada at work, stop struggling over imagined boundaries, and have faith that life is shaped by many other forces, not just the ones we have control over.

As long as we don't have faith, we carry the burden of solving all problems. We will be impatient and fight and cling. Wisdom is enjoying things that drift in and letting go of things that drift away, like watching the waves drift in and out of the beach.

> Arjuna, those who keep thinking of property get attached to it and crave it relentlessly, which causes frustration, which leads to anger, then confusion, then loss of memory, then loss of intelligence, and eventually destruction.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, verses 62 and 63 (paraphrased).*

There is no violation in nature. Only violence. Violation follows when we grant meaning to things and derive our identity from them. We are attached to property as long as we are disconnected from ātmā.

17.
You and I can be generous

Moksha is liberation from the fear that makes us cling. Only when we let go can we be materially and emotionally and intellectually generous. This alternative to the trap of rebirth is ofered by KṚṢṆA in Chapter 8 of The Gītā. The tug-of-war between the inner world of liberation and the outer world of entrapment is elaborated in Chapter 15 of The Gītā. In Chapter 18 of The Gītā, KṚṢṆA clarifies whether letting go involves giving up of action itself, or giving up the expectation for a particular reaction.

Chapter 15 begins with a spectacular visual to explain the world we live in.

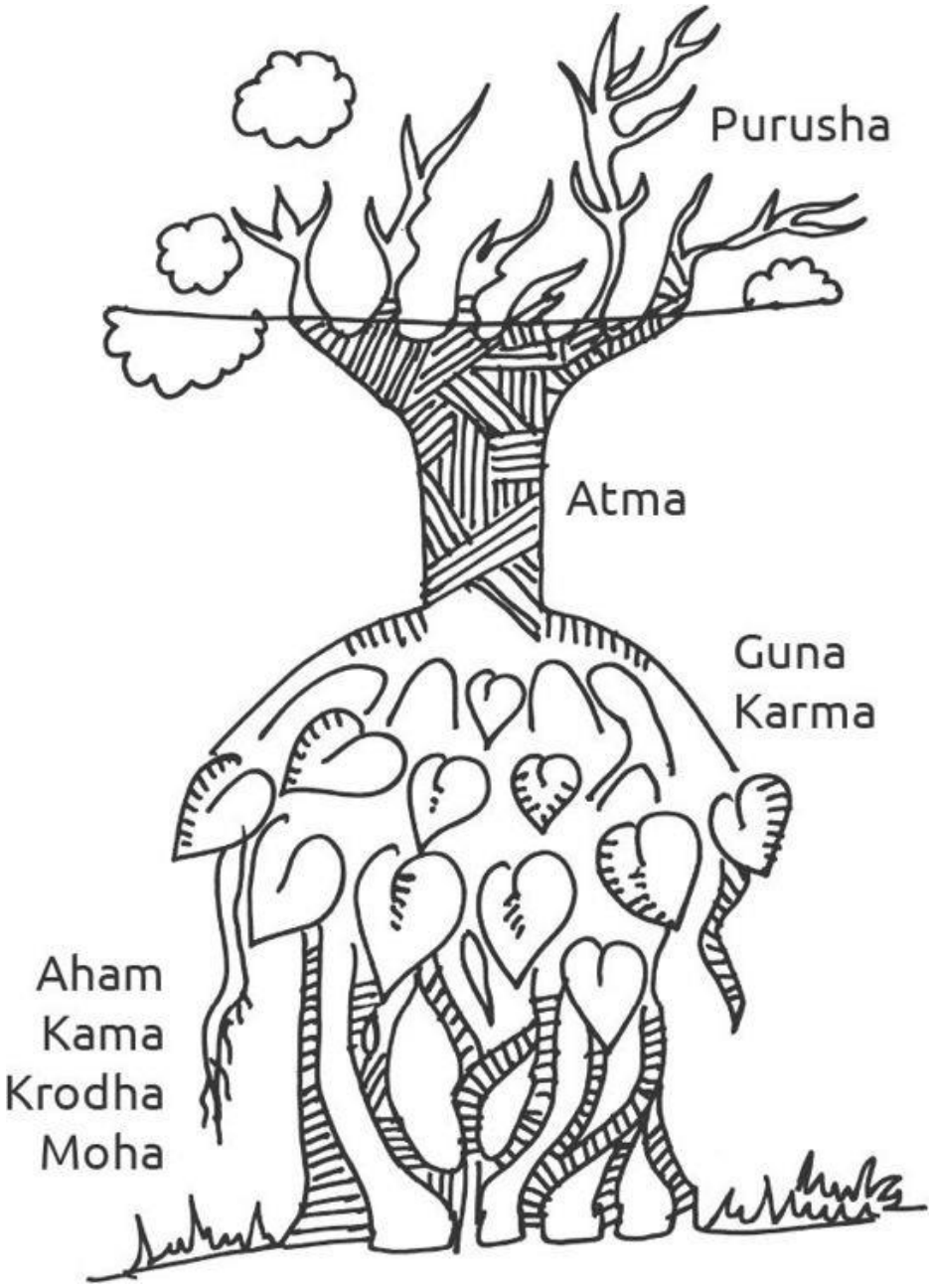
> Arjuna, there is a banyan tree that grows upside down, its roots in the sky and its trunk below. The wise know that Veda constitutes its leaves. The branches go up and down, as a consequence of nature's tendencies, nourished by experiences. The aerial roots that grow down are actions born of desire that bind it to the realm of men. Wisdom alone can cut these downward roots, enabling discovery of the reverse banyan tree, with its primal roots, before enchantment of the senses began and obscured the view.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 15, verses 1 to 4 (paraphrased).*

The banyan tree is sacred to the Hindus. It symbolizes immortality (akshaya). But it is unique in that it has primary roots and secondary roots. The latter grow from its branches and eventually become so thick that it becomes impossible to distinguish them from the main tree trunk.

In this verse, KṚṢṆA visualizes a banyan tree growing from the sky, its primary roots rising up into the sky, its secondary roots growing down to the earth. Thus, it is being nourished from above and below. The primary root rising from the sky is nourished by inner mental reality. The secondary roots going down to the earth are nourished by external material reality.

The tree is who we are. We are nourished from within as well as without. Within is the ātmā that is immortal and infinite, and so does not suffer from the anxieties of the mortal and the finite. It is neither hungry nor frightened, nor does it yearn for Vālīdation. Without is the world of things, people, our relationships, our desires and frustrations. When we derive value from the outside, we assume that our identity is the anxious aham. So KṚṢṆA advises Arjuna to use the axe of knowledge (gyāna) to cut down all secondary roots, take refuge in the primary root of ātmā and liberate himself. This is moksha, liberation, where we no longer seek Vālīdation from the outside, but feel eternally Vālīdated from the inside. Moksha is liberation from fear.

> Arjuna, he who truly understands the truth of mind, matter and material tendencies is liberated from rebirth, no matter what his lifestyle.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, Verse 23 (paraphrased).*



Upside-down Banyan Tree

The Buddha spoke of desire (tanha, in Pali) as the cause of all suffering. Hence he advised people to shun desire by accepting the truth of life — nothing is fixed or permanent, not even identity.

The Gītā, however, speaks of two kinds of identity: external identity or aham, based on property, and internal identity or ātmā, based on wisdom. Aham is the fruit of fear. Ātmā is the fruit of wisdom. Aham is the seed of Kāma, krodha, lobha, moha, mada and matsarya. Ātmā results in moksha. With ātmā, we don't cling. We

don't seek control. We simply let go. We become generous. And we allow.

Mada to Moksha

> Arjuna, one who gives up conceit and ownership and craving, in other words the sense of 'I', 'mine' and 'me', will always find peace.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 2, Verse 71 (paraphrased).*

How we give things away to others is a good indicator of moksha. In a yagna, a svāhā can be either dakśiṇā, bhikśā or dāna. Dakśiṇā is payment for service received. In other words, with dakśiṇā we repay a debt (rin), complete a transaction and are free from all obligations. Bhikśā is charity, a good deed (punya) for which we expect something in exchange — respect, admiration, acknowledgment or blessings. Dāna is giving away things without expecting anything in return. There is no expectation from the Devatā. No obligation is imposed upon him. There is no talk of debt, or fruit of action. In The Gītā, dāna can be sattvik, rajasik or tamasik. Dakśiṇā and bhikśā are equated with rajasik dāna.

> Arjuna, charity that is given to a suitable candidate at the right time and place without expecting him to give anything in return is sattvik; charity given unwillingly or to get something in return is rajasik; charity given without thought, at the wrong time and place to unsuitable candidates out of contempt and disrespect is tamasik.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 17, verses 20 to 22 (paraphrased).*

This is elaborated in two stories, one from the Mahābhārata and one from the Bhāgavata. Both stories have the same beginning but very different endings.

Two childhood friends, out of affection for each other, promise to share all that they possess even when they grow into adulthood. One is the son of a nobleman, the other the son of a priest. Fortune favours the nobleman's son, not the priest's son. Reduced to abject poverty, the desperate but hesitant priest's son decides to approach his rich friend.

In the Mahābhārata, Drupada, king of Panchala, insults the pauper Droṇa for assuming that promises of childhood matter in adulthood. He tells Droṇa to earn a service fee, or beg for alms, as befits a priest, rather than demand a share of the royal fortune in the name of friendship, as if it was his right. Friendship can only exist between equals, he is told. A furious Droṇa leaves the palace, determined to become Drupada's equal — a decision that leads to a spiral of vendetta that culminates in the bloody carnage at Kuru-kśetra with Droṇa supporting the Kauravas and Drupada supporting the Pāṅdavas.

In the Bhāgavata, however, the pauper is Sudāmā and the king, KṚṢṆA. He is warmly welcomed and showered with lavish gifts by his rich friend.

Drupada does what a king is supposed to: lay down the law, tell Droṇa not to curry personal favours and advise him to behave instead in keeping with his role in society. As a priest, Droṇa can either ask for a fee (dakśiṇā) if services are rendered, or for alms (bhikśā) if no services are rendered. Drupada, unfortunately, does not do darśan: he does not see that Droṇa is embarrassed by his need to ask for help, so hides his awkwardness by reminding Drupada of his childhood promise and 'demanding' his share. Droṇa also does not do darśan: he is too consumed by his poverty to notice that Drupada is a changed man, not the friend he once knew.

Sudāmā, on the other hand, despite being poor, is sensitive to the change of status over the years. He does darśan of KṚṢṆA and realizes his childhood friend may not recognize him, considering that years have passed and fortunes have changed. Despite his poverty, he carries a gift for KṚṢṆA: a packet of puffed rice saved by denying

himself a few meals. KṚṢṆA also does darśan of Sudāmā, does not gloat over the latter's poverty but instead demands affection, even a gift, making Sudāmā realize he is still remembered and much loved. Sudāmā, overwhelmed by KṚṢṆA's generosity, asks for nothing, only to discover he is given everything.

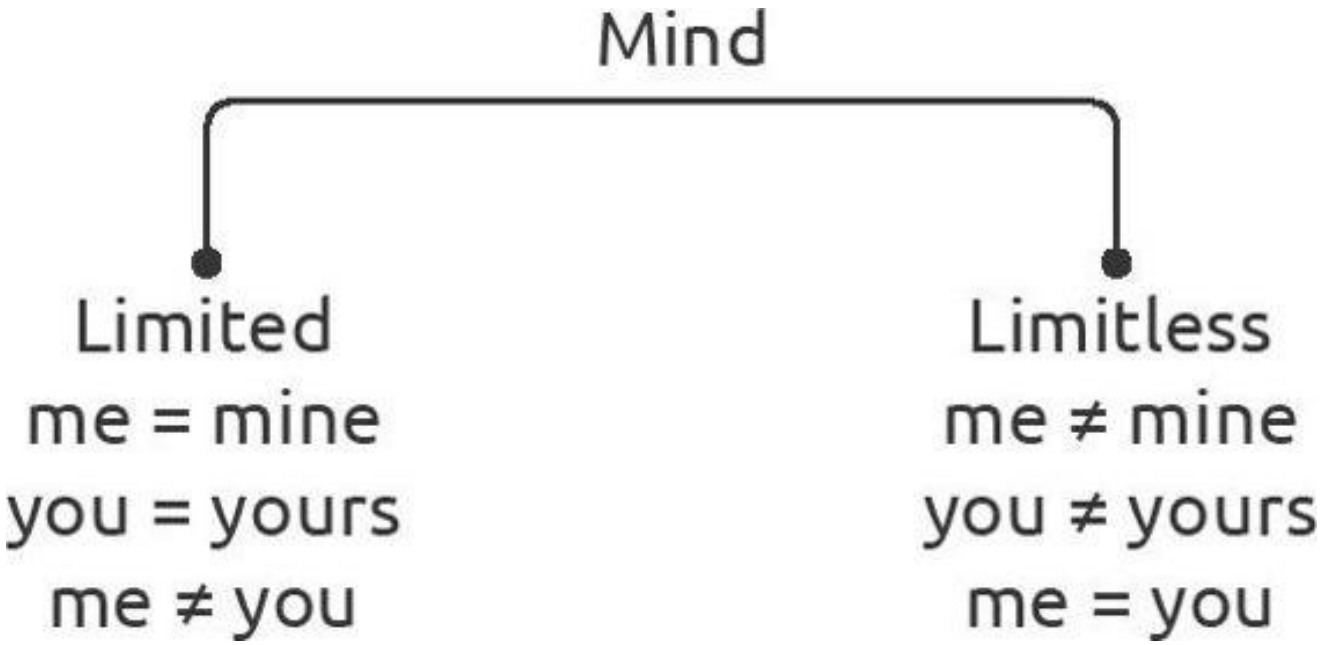
Dāna creates neither obligations nor expectations. It is an indicator of moksha. Moksha follows when we do not feel we have to cling to our wealth or dominate people around us, because we do not derive our identity either from our wealth or our power. Wealth and power are just tools to make our life comfortable, and enable those around us.

Types of Charity

Another indicator of moksha is allowing, which is essentially emotional generosity. We notice that the Rāmāyāṇa ends in tragedy, with Sitā being banished. The Bhāgavata also ends with heartbreak, with KṚṢṆA promising Rādhā, the gopikas and his mother, Yashoda, that he will come back, but not returning because of his obligations in Mathurā. Even the Mahābhārata ends with the realization of the curse hurled by Gāṅdhārī at KṚṢṆA for not preventing the death of her children, or those of Draupadi.

However, a sad Sitā is not angry at Rāma. She knows him and understands him well, his wisdom, his love, as well as the burdens of kingship that limit him. A heartbroken Rādhā is not angry at KṚṢṆA. She too understands that KṚṢṆA has to walk his path, and even she cannot be his companion, as she has familial obligations. A thoughtful KṚṢṆA is not angry at Gāṅdhārī. He understands her rage, her inability to take responsibility for her blindfold that contributed to her children's insecurity. Sitā does not derive her identity from Rāma.

Rādhā does not derive her identity from KṚṢṆA. KṚṢṆA does not derive his identity from Gāṅdhārī. All three are immersed in dehi, ātmā, kshetri, brahmana and Bhagavān. Each one is an inverted banyan tree, forever nourished by the sky, and forever nourishing the earth.



Limited to Limitlessness

Am I aware of my fears that make me greedy, stingy and controlling? What stops me from being generous materially, emotionally and intellectually? Liberation, essentially, is letting go of our insecurities that disconnect us from others.

18.
You and I matter to each other

Generosity presupposes the other. Monastic traditions focus on isolating the self from the other. The Gītā, however, is the doctrine of the householder, not the hermit, the one who does not withdraw from the battlefield but fights without attachment or hatred, and so is neither violated nor violates. So while Buddhism speaks of anatta (absence of ātmā) and nirvana (oblivion of self), The Gītā speaks of **ātmā-rati**, the joy of the immortal within, and **brahma-nirvana**, discovery of the other. This relationship between the self (jiva-ātmā) and the other (param-ātmā) forms the theme of this, our final chapter. KṚṢṆA introduces this idea early on in The Gītā, as samādhī, in Chapter 2.

The Gītā ends twice. First, with KṚṢṆA concluding his discourse.

> Arjuna, thus have I passed on the most secrets of secrets. Reflect on it and do as you wish. If you trust me completely and forsake all other paths, know that I will liberate you. Do not share this knowledge with the cynical, disdainful or disinterested. Those who share my words, I adore. Those who hear my words, even without understanding, are blessed with joy. I hope you have focussed on what I said. I hope this knowledge has shattered all delusion.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, verses 63 to 72 (paraphrased).*

Arjuna confirms that his delusion is shattered and perspective has been replaced by focus. He stands firm, with clear resolve and no doubts, ready to do as told.

Sanjaya then concludes The Gītā once again, expressing his gratitude towards Vyāsa for giving him the telepathic sight that enabled him to hear KṚṢṆA's wise words and see KṚṢṆA's magnificent form. Finally, in the last paragraph of The Gītā, he gives his personal take on KṚṢṆA's discourse.

> Where KṚṢṆA yokes the mind and Arjuna bears the bow, there is always fortune, success, dominion, stability, and law. That is my opinion.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, Verse 78 (paraphrased).*

The difference between the two conclusions is stark. KṚṢṆA's conclusion is rather psychological. Sanjaya's conclusion is very material. KṚṢṆA offers Arjuna liberation from worldly fetters (moksha) if Arjuna demonstrates faith in him by performing his role as a warrior, for the benefit of others, without any expectation of reward. Sanjaya believes KṚṢṆA's discourse holds five promises: fortune (shri), success (vijaya), dominion (bhu), stability (dhruva) and law (niti).

Arjuna's problem concerned only him, but KṚṢṆA's solution made him consider the other. Sanjaya is the other: the embodiment of the people of Hastināpura, who are overlooked in the war between the Pāṅdavas and the Kauravas. For Sanjaya, The Gītā is clearly a discourse meant for kings, who are expected to rule, take responsibility for their subjects and usher in peace and prosperity, rather than fight wars in self-indulgence. It is Sanjaya's appeal to Dhṛtarāṣṭrato listen to The Gītā and outgrow his own victimhood, that blinds him to the plight of others.

> Arjuna, whatever a noble person does, the world follows. — *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, Verse 21 (paraphrased).*

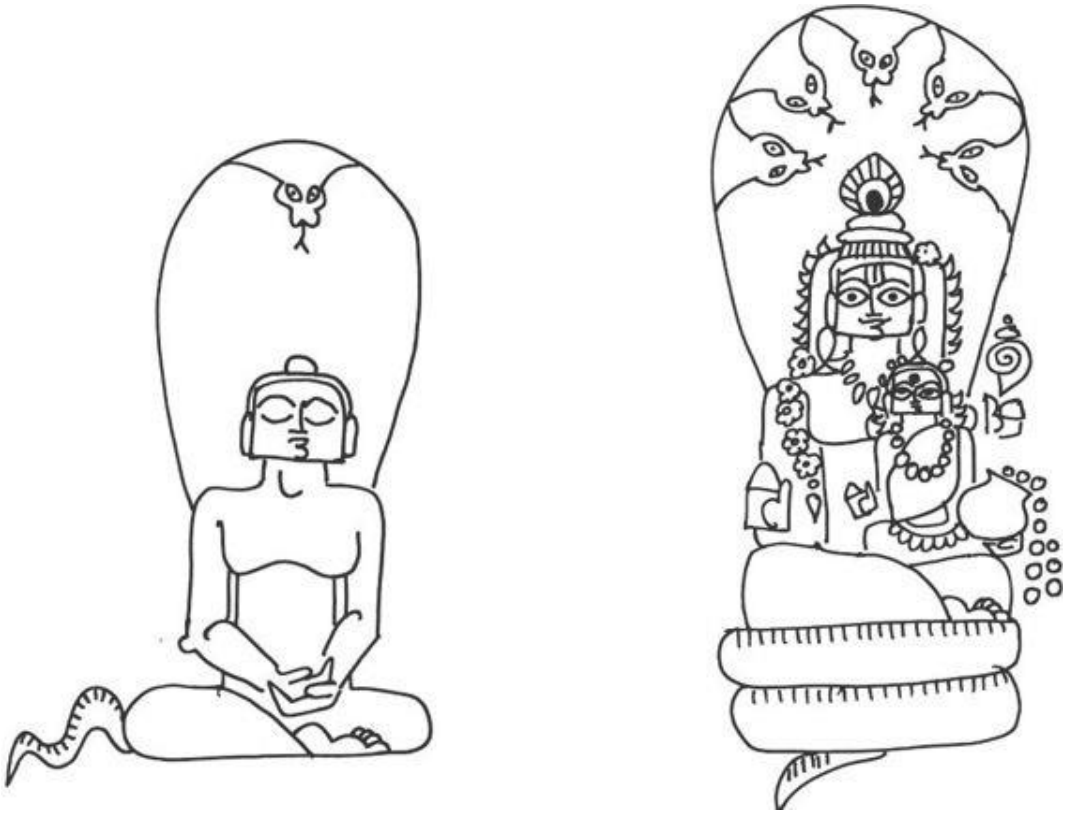
Sanjaya's conclusion connects The Gītā to Vaishnava mythology, for Shri and Bhu are proper nouns, referring to the two consorts of

Viṣṇū, who is also known as Vijaya, the victorious one. Viṣṇū is visualized as the king of the universe, dressed in regal attire, attended by his queens: Shri, who embodies intangible fortunes such as sovereignty, glory, fame and charisma; and Bhu, who embodies tangible fortune like the earth and its treasures. Dhruva and Niti are Viṣṇū's devotees. Dhruva embodies the Pole Star, a child who wants to sit on Viṣṇū's lap, the only seat from which no one can pull him down, so that he can enjoy forever the affection of his divine father. Niti means law, that is of value only when it submits to the idea of Viṣṇū, which is dharma. With dharma, law will help the helpless and provide justice (nyāya) to all. Without dharma, law will be a tool for control, oppression and even sabotage.

We must remind ourselves of the period when the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata came to be written. It was a time when kinship was giving way to kingship, meaning that communities included not just members of the same extended family or tribe (kin), but also members of other families, tribes and clans. Thus, the RāMāyāṇa is the story of the descendants of Ikshvaku engaging with outsiders—va-naras and rakshasas, who follow the jungle way. The Mahābhārata is the story of tension within the Kuru clan itself, between two branches of the same family. The central issue in both epics is property: the thrones of Ayodhyā, Kishkinda and Lanka in the RāMāyāṇa and the throne of Hastināpura in the Mahābhārata. A good king was supposed to be one who took care of those he called his own (mama) as well as the rest (para). Rāma is considered the greatest king, as he was more concerned about his kingdom and his family's reputation than his personal happiness. KṚṢṆA is considered the greatest kingmaker, as he shows the Pāṅdavas that war is not about vengeance or ambition, it is about governance.

> Arjuna, there is nothing in the three worlds that I need to do or gain. Yet I work, for if I don't, others won't, and I will be the cause of confusion and destruction of all that has been created.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 3, verses 22 to 24 (paraphrased).*

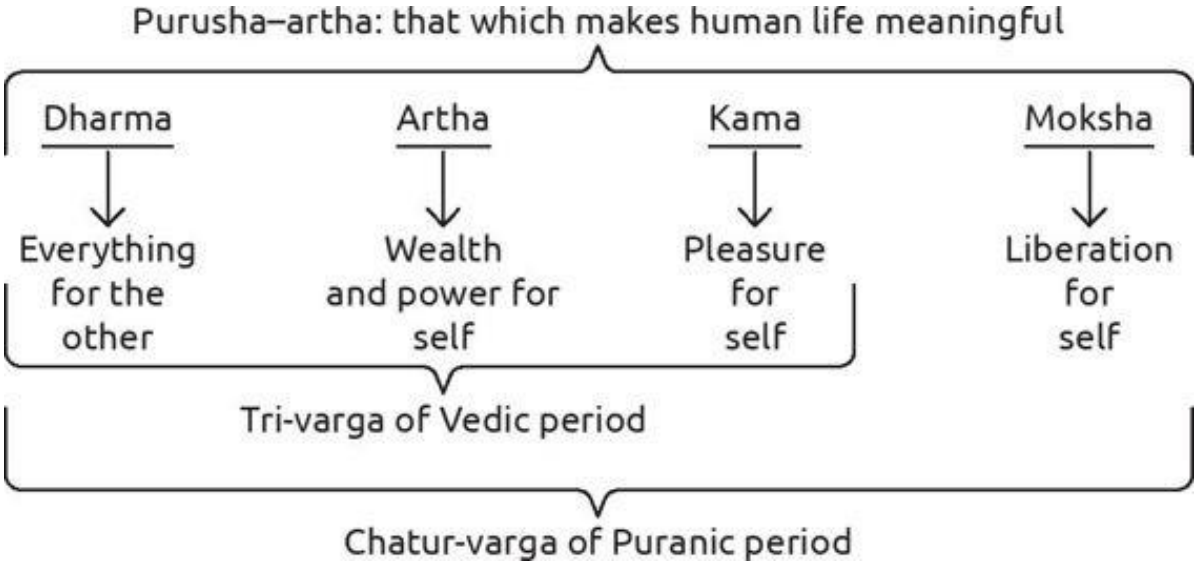
Viṣṇū reclines on the coils of a serpent. The image of a man seated under the hood of a serpent was typically used to depict leaders of monastic movements, such as the Buddha, for example, and the Jain tirthankara Parsva- nath. By making Viṣṇū occupy the same seat, the Purāṇas were communicating the message that a great man did not have to be a monk; he could also be king. The Gītā is Vedic wisdom customized to the needs of king and kingdom. The kingdom needs the king but the king also needs the kingdom.



Under the Serpent Hood

The Gītā introduces a subtle tension between the concepts of dharma and moksha. Dharma demands social engagement, while moksha is about social disengagement. Dharma is about building relationships. Moksha is about abandoning relationships. Dharma binds people to society. Moskha enables them to break free. In Vedic times, dharma was seen as appropriate for the youth, while moksha was seen as appropriate for the old, until followers of Buddhism and Jainism popularized the hermit culture and made it part of the mainstream, 2,500 years ago. In Vedic Hinduism, dharma is valued over moksha. But in Puranic Hinduism, moksha starts being valued

over dharma, indicating the growing influence of Hindu monastic orders for the past 1,000 years.



Inclusion of Moksha

Today we tend to see moksha as aspirational, almost the goal of Hindu life. But the concept of 'goal' makes sense only in one-life cultures, where existence has an expiry date. In rebirth cultures there are no expiry dates, hence no goals, only pursuits that make our endless life meaningful (puruśa-artha). Originally three categories (tri-varga) of pursuit were identified: dharma, artha and Kāma, or social obligations, power and pleasure. Later, moksha was included as the fourth category (chatur-varga). A judge finds moksha to be the best of the three, while an observer is able to see the contextual appropriateness of each varga. While artha, Kāma and moksha focus primarily on the self, dharma alone is about the other. This is why KṚṢṆA keeps speaking about action, not inaction, engagement, not withdrawal.

> Arjuna, when doing your duties, surrender yourself to me, offer all actions to be, and demonstrate equanimity no matter what the reaction— you will be liberated and at peace. Fix your mind on me and you will overcome all obstacles. Rely on your conceit and you will perish.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, verses 56 to 58 (paraphrased).*

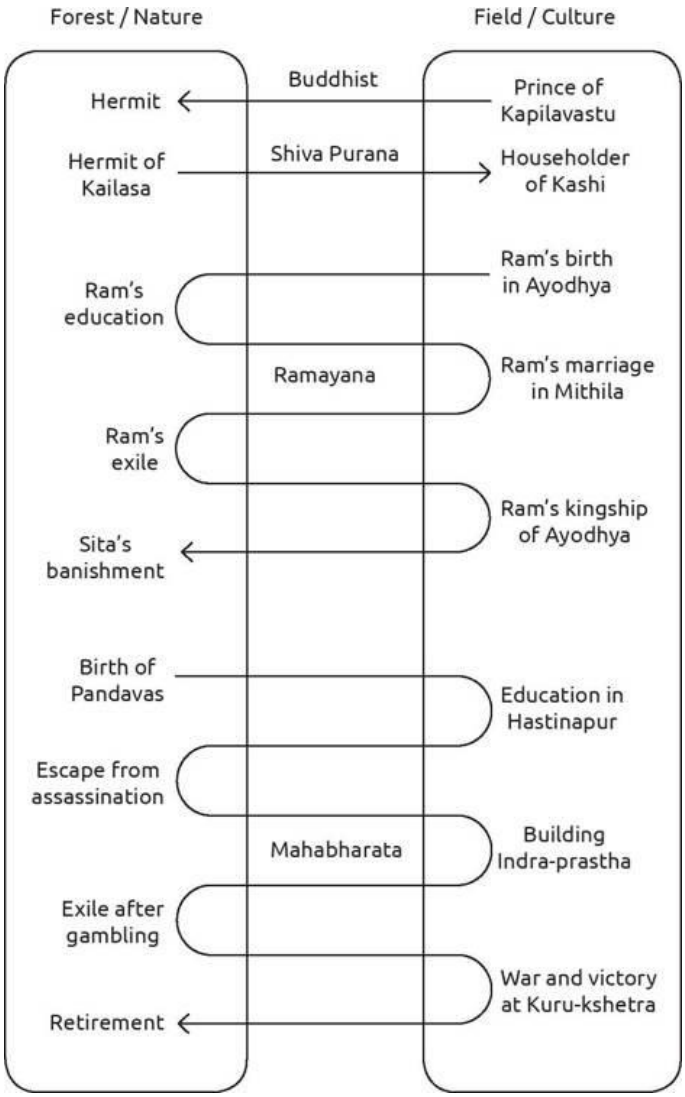
In Buddhist mythology, Siddhartha Gautama walks away from wife, child, father and kingdom, and goes into the forest to solve the problem of suffering. In the forest he encounters and defeats Mara, the demon of desire, to become the Buddha. In Hindu mythology, Mara is Kāma, Bhagavān of desire, and he is a friend of Indra, king of the devas. In Indra's abode, Amaravati, all desires are indulged. That is why it is called Svarga, which means 'paradise'.

But Indra is insecure and restless; he fears that all his treasures will be taken away. He has no faith. No temples are built for Indra. Temples are built for Śiva instead, who opens his third eye and burns Kāma to a heap of ash. Śiva 's abode, Kailasa, is a mountain of stone covered with ice. Nothing grows here. Nothing can survive here. But it does not matter, for in Śiva 's abode there is no desire, no hunger, hence no need for food.

In Śiva temples, Śiva is always associated with Shakti, the Bhagavāndess. She manifests as the trough (yoni) in which the solitary stone pillar (lingam) representing Śiva is made to stand. Śiva may withdraw from the world as a hermit, but she binds him to the earth, transforms him into a householder and makes him descend from the lofty inhospitable icy peaks of Kailasa to the riverside city of Kashi, full of markets and crematoriums. Here, the Bhagavāndess makes him aware of, and attentive to, the desires, hungers and fears of those who are not as resourceful, capable and accomplished as he. The self is made to empathize with the inadequacies of the other and feel love, not disdain. She is Kāmakshi, whose eyes evoke desire. Through her desire is reborn, but located in the other. She is Paramita, the one who completes the self through the other (para/param). She is Annapoorna, who provides food for all, and he becomes Bhikśātan, the beggar, who begs for others. They create two children: the corpulent elephant-headed Ganesha and the mighty lance-bearing Kartikeya, embodiments of Śiva 's grace as he acknowledges the human struggle with meaning and Vālīdation.

When Siddhartha Gautama finally returns from the forest, he is an enlightened teacher, not a wise husband, father, son or king. His wisdom causes detachment. In other words he returns, but does not

reconnect. But in Hindu epics, return from the forest is always about reconnection. In the RāMāyāṇa, palace intrigues force Rāma to go to the forest, where he discovers, and rejects, the ways of the jungle and returns to be a great king. In the Mahābhārata, the Pāṅdavas are born in the forest, and they return to the forest for the first time when their lives are threatened by the Kauravas, the second time after they gamble away their fortune and the third time after having ruled Hastināpura successfully for a very long time. With each return, they are wiser in the ways of society. While the forest teaches the Buddha to disconnect from all relationships, it enables the protagonists of the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata to connect and be better at relationships.



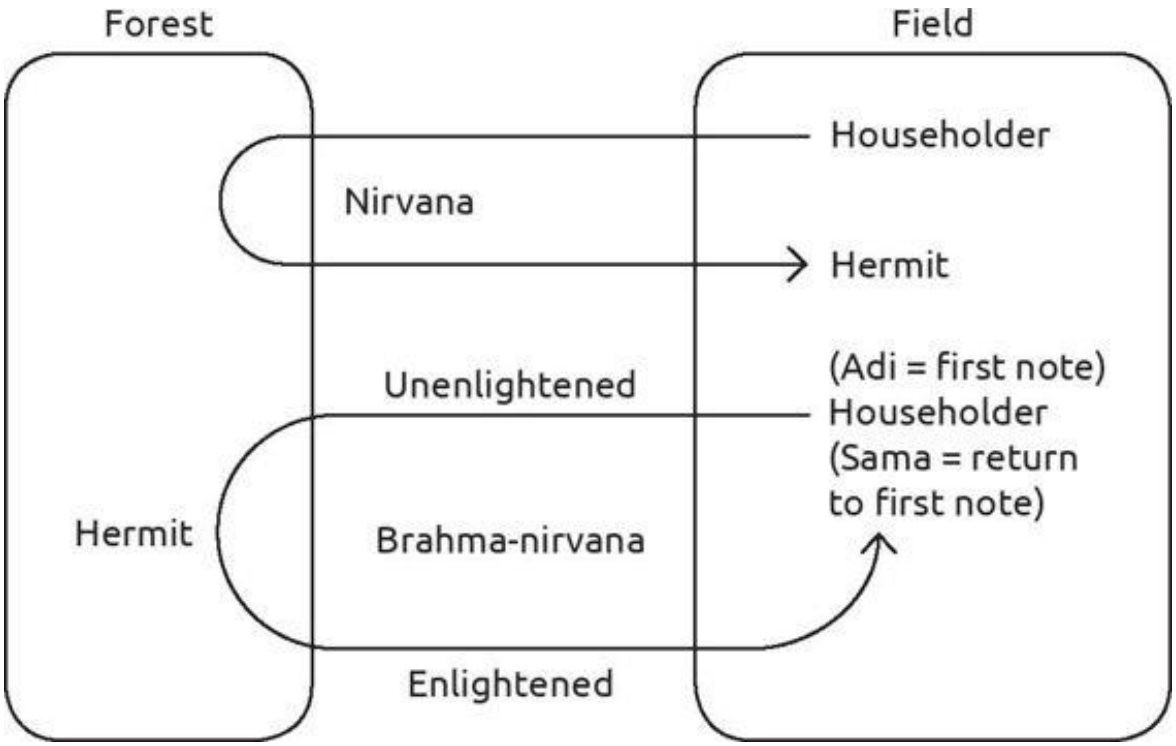
Return of the Buddha, Rāma and the Pāṅdavas from the Forest

In Pataṅjalī's Yoga-sutra, there are eight steps, which involve gradual withdrawal from society through the body, breath, senses and mind towards the ātmā. The final step is called samādhī, and is said to be a union with the infinite. For a hermit, samādhī refers to the ability to voluntarily leave his physical body and merge with the infinite. For the householder, it means something else. And the clue lies in the structure of the word itself.

The word 'samādhī' is based on two words: 'sama' that means the first beat of the musical cycle in Hindustani classical music and 'adi' that means primal origin. The hermit's journey begins by withdrawing from the other. The householder's journey ends by returning to the other. It is the return to the first beat. It is the return to the primal origin. It is about returning from the forest liberated (moksha) to reconnect (yoga) with those we left behind, those who are very different from us (brahma-nirvana).

The hermit may seek zero (Śuṅya), hence withdrawal and oblivion (nirvana). But the householder can seek infinity (ananta), hence participation, which leads to expansion of the mind to accommodate the infinite truths of those around (brahma-nirvana). KṚṢṆA thus makes moksha an outcome of dharma.

> Arjuna, he who is at peace with himself, happy with himself, illuminated by the knowledge of the resident within all beings, finds supreme bliss everywhere. He does not see himself as separate and disconnected and finds happiness in the happiness of all creatures. This state of being exists everywhere for the wise one who has outgrown desire and rage.— *Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 5, verses 24 to 26 (paraphrased).*



Return to the Origin

If Indra's heaven, Svarga, is about indulging desires, hungers and fears, and Śiva 's heaven, Kailasa, is about outgrowing desires, hungers and fears, then Viṣṇū's heaven, Vaikuntha, is about outgrowing desires, hungers and fears of the self by gaining perspective on the desires, hungers and fears of others.

Vaikuntha is located on the shore-less ocean of milk. This ocean of milk is a metaphor for nature (prakriti), its shore-less state indicating that it has no purpose or destination, and milk indicating that all wealth is ultimately churned out of nature. Here Viṣṇū lies in deep slumber until the cries of the earth Bhagavāndess wake him up and force him to watch the rise and fall of human societies, the alternating victories and defeats of the devas and the asuras who seek control over the world. Viṣṇū descends in various moral forms (avatars) to help everyone appreciate the reality of nature (prakriti) and the potential of humanity (puruśa).

Besides being a saviour, Viṣṇū is also an enjoyer (rasika) of the various flavours (rasa) of existence. His temples contain dancing halls (natya-mandapa), food halls (bhoga-mandapa), assembly halls (jaga-

mohana) and wedding halls (kalyana-mandapa). They are associated with fine music, fragrances and garments.

Unlike the independent Śiva made dependable by Shakti, Viṣṇū displays vulnerability and dependence on the other when he descends as Rāma and KṚṢṆA, for the other also wants to feel powerful and valued, and this can only happen when the self 'consumes' the other. I want you to need me. If you do not need me, and only give me, without taking anything from me, I feel inadequate, meaningless, valueless and purposeless. In wanting me, you illuminate me and contribute to my fulfilment. Likewise, you want me to need you. If I do not need you, if I am dependable but detached, you will feel insulted, hurt, unwanted, and I will appear patronizing.

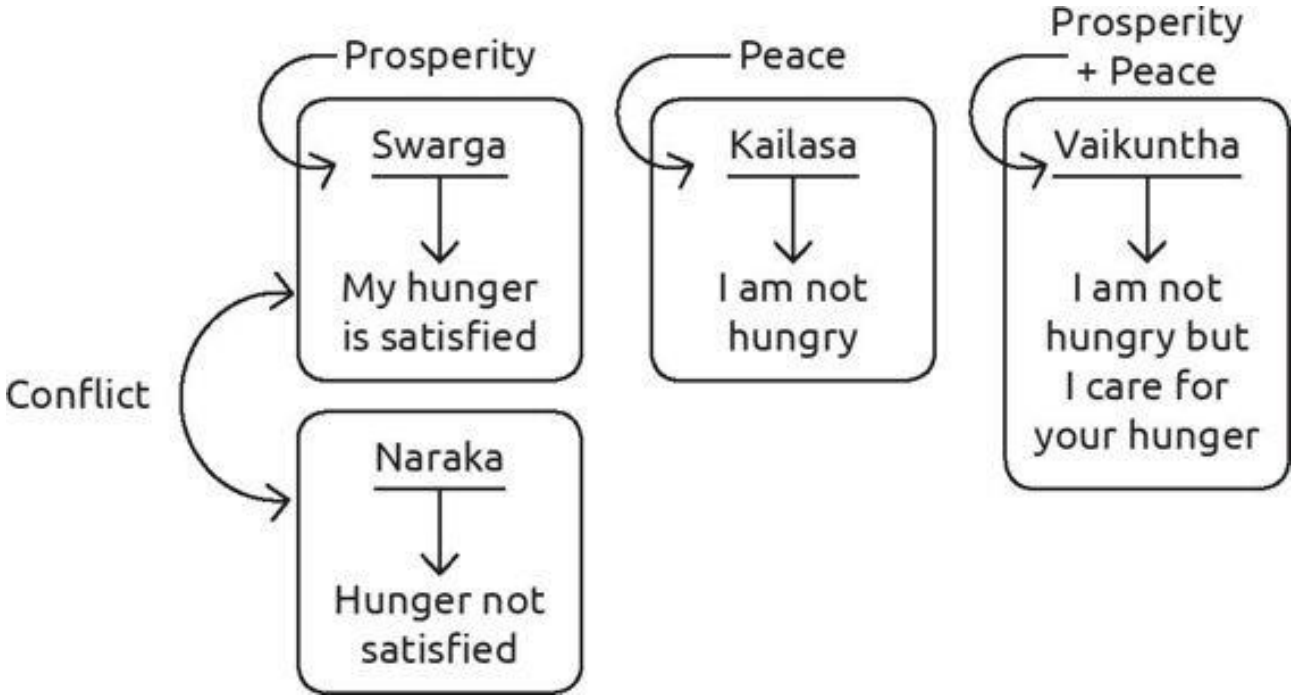
Brahma

Viṣṇū stories in the RāMāyāṇa, Bhāgavata and Mahābhārata reveal how he experiences birth, death and even heartbreak. Both Rāma and KṚṢṆA display human emotions, yearning for the beloved. Though Bhagavān, Rāma cannot be with Sitā, KṚṢṆA cannot be with Rādhā. Yet they do not turn bitter, angry or vengeful. They love unconditionally.

This idea of a vulnerable Bhagavān, who gets as much as he gives, is unique to Hinduism. While the transformation of the wise Buddha of old Buddhism into the compassionate Bodhisattva of later Buddhism mirrors the transformation of the hermit Śiva into the householder Śaṅkara, the idea of Viṣṇū, who is at once king and hermit and lover, who not only cares for but needs the other, is unique to Vaishnava mythology.

Hermit to Householder

Neither Sitā, who Viṣṇū abandons as Rāma, nor Rādhā, who he abandons as KṚṢṆA, begrudges him. They also love him unconditionally. Love, in either case, does not guarantee happiness. Love, in either case, does not manifest as control. Loving is its own reward, the ultimate human possibility. This is ātmā- rati, feeling fulfilled in doing the deed without expecting a reward, referred to in Chapter 3, Verse 7. This is the outcome of brahma-sthithi, being firm in the understanding of human imagination, referred to in Chapter 2, Verse 72. It follows accepting oneself as nimitta-matra, instrument of a larger narrative, referred to in Chapter 11, Verse 33.



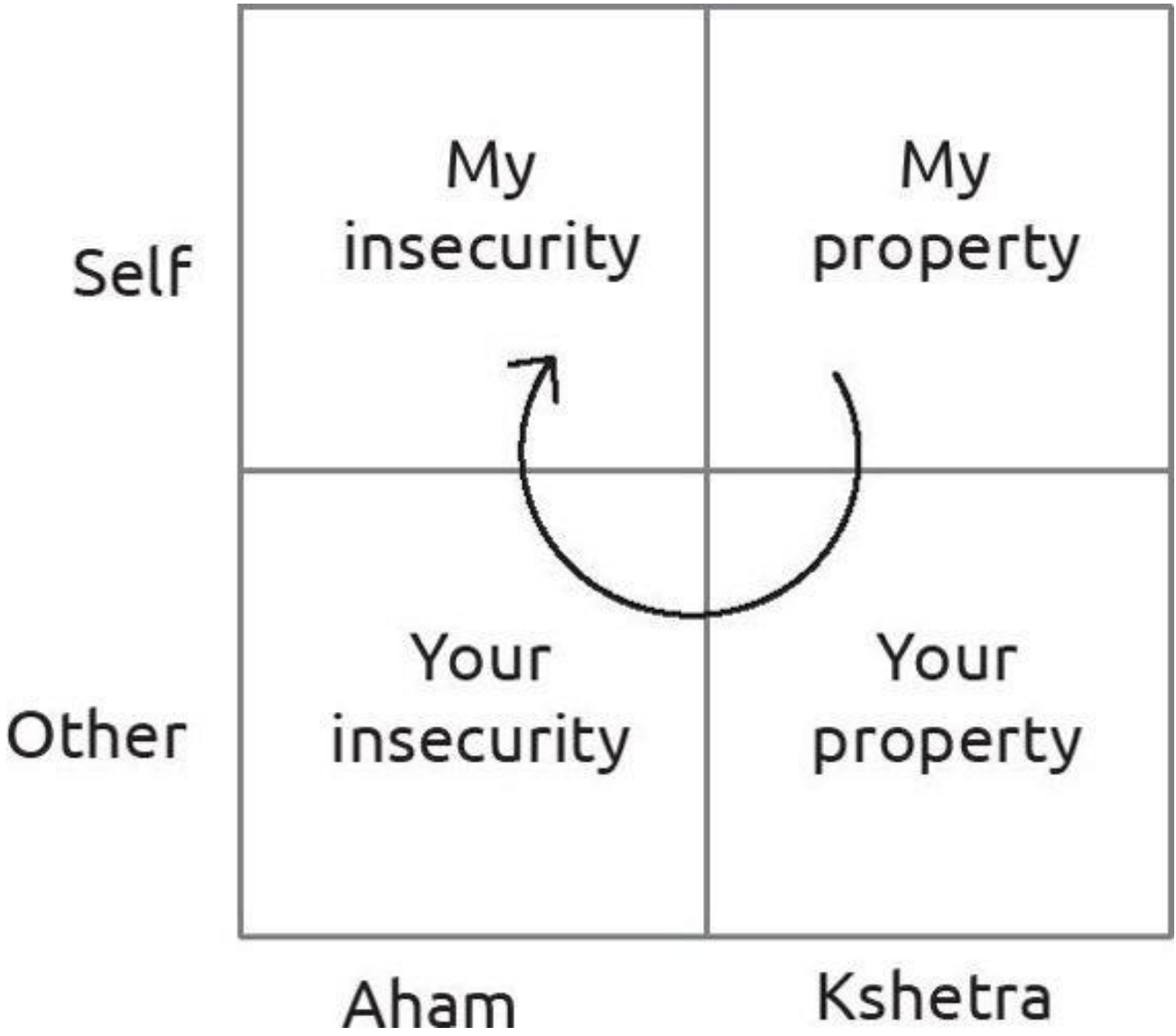
Svarga, Kailasa, Vaikuntha

Buddhism popularized the hermit practice of shutting the eyes and contemplating (dhyāna); while Puranic Hinduism popularized the householder practice of opening the eyes and seeing the deity in the temple (darśan). In one, there is focus on the inner journey. In the other, the inner journey is meant to facilitate the outer journey.

The Buddhist concept of nirvana offers freedom from suffering by realizing that even the idea of the self is manufactured by the mind. The Gītā's concept of brahma-nirvana offers awareness of, and empathy for, the manufactured anxieties of the other, their need to control and dominate and cling, their inability to let go despite being enabled and empowered to do so. The more we observe the other, without judgement, the more we see ourselves mirrored in them. We realize our manufactured anxieties that indulge our manufactured selves.

> Arjuna, he who is always aware of the divine, and unites with the divine, within and without, will always be at peace and blissful.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 6, Verse 15 (paraphrased).*

Typically, we are trapped in a world where there is conflict between my kśetra and your kśetra. I compare what I have with what you have and this leads to conflict and competition as between the Pāṅdavas and the Kauravas. Darśan begins when I look at your aham, the hungers and fears that constitute your imagined identity, and discover my aham, fears and hungers that constitute my imagined identity. This is what KṚṢṆA asks Arjuna to do. Only then do we discover the ātmā that permeates all beings and all things, that is infinite, immortal and at peace.



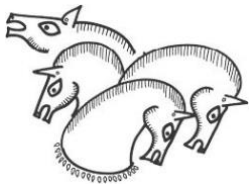
The Journey of The Gītā

In other words, darśan of the other leads to darśan of the self. Darśan without leads to darśan within. This is ātmā-gyāna, self-

awareness that enables us to accept, maybe even outgrow, our own anxieties and be kinder to ourselves, and others, even in a fight.

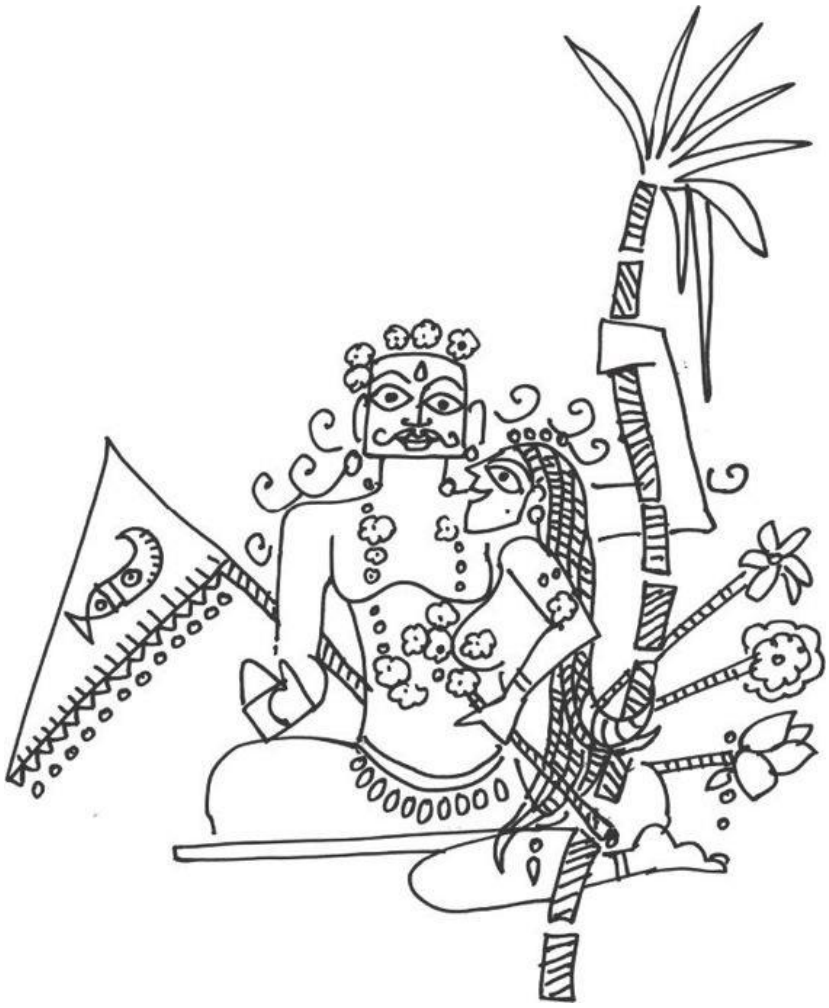
This is the promise of The Gītā, revealed through me to you.

Can you and I participate in a relationship without seeking to control the behaviour of the other? Can we help each other outgrow our hungers and fears? Then we are on the path of brahma-nirvana. When we derive joy from within, not from achievements outside, we are on the path of ātmā- rati.



After *My Gītā*: Yet Another Discourse by KṚṢṆA

After The Gītā, there was the Kāma Gītā, the song of the Bhagavān of desire, and then the Anu Gītā, the follow-up Gītā, both narrated by KṚṢṆA. This is how they come about.



Kāma Gītā

As he concludes the Bhagavad Gītā, KṚṢṆA asks Arjuna if he has heard what has been said and if he is free of confusion. Yes, says Arjuna.

> KṚṢṆA, by your grace, I am no longer deluded or confused. I remember what I am supposed to do. I am firm. I have no doubts. I shall do as you say.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 18, Verse 73 (paraphrased).*

Arjuna then blows his conch shell, announcing the start of the war, and lets KṚṢṆA take him into battle. KṚṢṆA's perspective brings back Arjuna's focus; confusion is replaced by clarity, paralysis with action. All is well that ends well.

At least, so we think.

But as the days of the war progress, Arjuna shows repeated moments of doubt, despair and dilemma. He is unable to bring himself to kill Bhisma who is like a father to him, Droṇa who is his teacher and Karṇa who stands before him unarmed, despite KṚṢṆA goading him on to do so.

After the war too, doubts persist.

In Ashwamedika Parva, Book 14 of the Mahābhārata, Arjuna overhears KṚṢṆA present the very short Kāma Gītā to his eldest brother:

'Yudhishthira, hear what Kāma, Bhagavān of craving, says about himself. He who seeks to destroy craving with weapons ends up craving those very weapons. He who seeks to destroy craving with charity ends up craving charity. He who seeks to destroy craving with scriptures ends up craving scriptures. He who seeks to destroy craving with truth ends up craving truth. He who seeks to destroy craving with austerities ends up craving austerities. He who seeks to destroy craving with renunciation ends up craving renunciation. Craving cannot be destroyed, but it can be put to good use by locating it in dharma. So seek to destroy craving with the pursuit of dharma. You will ends up craving dharma! And that will be good for the whole

world, for you will then conduct more and more exchange, bring prosperity to the world, liberating yourself in the process from all obligations, enabling others to give without expectations.'

Arjuna then approaches KṚṢṆA, just when he is about to leave for Dvārakā, with a request to repeat what he had said at the start of the war. 'Really!' replies KṚṢṆA, surprised, even a little irritated, by the request. 'You want me to recollect all that I had said then? That was a tense and inspired moment. I was in a state of full awareness, fully connected with the world and my faculties. That moment has passed.'

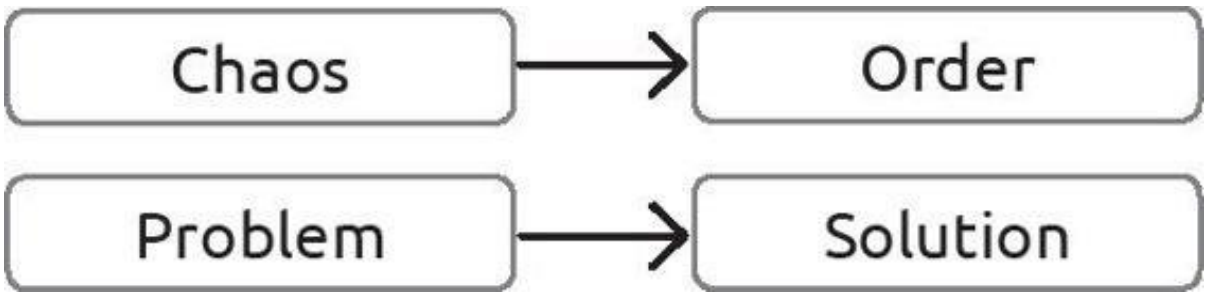
But still KṚṢṆA presents the Anu Gītā, or the follow-up Gītā, which is also located in Ashwamedika Parva, Book 14 of the Mahābhārata. The knowledge provided in the Anu Gītā is secondary. KṚṢṆA recalls three conversations: the first one between a sage called Kashyapa and a learned Brāhmaṇa, the second one between the Brāhmaṇa and his wife and the third one between the Brāhmaṇa and his student. The conversation is long: thirty-six chapters, double that of the Bhagavad Gītā, and far less lucid. Here, the quest for wisdom is described as journeying from one forest of metaphors to another. As in the Vyādha Gītā and the Bhagavad Gītā, reference is made to the wise King Janaka of Mithila, who was seen as the champion of the Upanishads, Sitā's father in the RāMāyāṇa. When this discourse ends, KṚṢṆA hopes that by sharing these three conversations of ancient sages, Arjuna has regained his knowledge of the Bhagavad Gītā. Then he leaves.

As in most other Gītās, the **Anu Gītā elaborates on karma and gyāna, not bhakti**. Perhaps Arjuna's emotional breakdown on the battlefield created the need for an innovation: an emotional anchor, faith in someone outside, someone bigger than everyone and everything around, someone who supports and cares unconditionally. In other words, Bhagavān! KṚṢṆA does not present himself as Bhagavān in the Anu Gītā, though Arjuna does identify and venerate KṚṢṆA as Bhagavān in the final chapter of the Anu Gītā, as the two ride out to Dvārakā.

As the Mahābhārata draws to a close, we are told that Arjuna, recipient of multiple discourses of Vedic wisdom from KṚṢṆA himself, lands up in hell (naraka) after his death, because of demerits accumulated owing to his insecurity and arrogance. He has to stay there until he is cleansed and only then can he rise to Svarga, the paradise of his father, Indra. Even here, stay is impermanent, only as long as his merits last. Viṣṇū's Vaikuntha remains elusive.

Arjuna may be the hero of the Mahābhārata, KṚṢṆA's companion and recipient of The Gītā. He may be Nara to KṚṢṆA's Nārāyaṇa. But that does not make him perfect. Even the state of the world after the war at Kuru-kśetra is far from perfect. In fact, traditionally, it marks the dawn of Kali yuga, the final era of a culture, before collapse. So much for KṚṢṆA's intervention!

The yearning for perfection stems from the desire to control and organize the world to our taste, to create a cocoon where everything makes sense to us. It demands that we judge the world as a problem that needs fixing, chaos that needs to be organized, a disease that needs to be cured, a polluted space that needs purification. It assumes that the world needs to have a climax, a happy ending, or else life is a tragedy. These are typical of finite narratives, where there is only one life to lead.



Climax of Finite Narratives

The word 'perfect' cannot be translated in Sanskrit, or any Indian language. The closest we come to it is excellent (uttam) and complete or comprehensive (purnatva), a reminder that Eden is not a Hindu concept. There is no fall from perfection, as in Abrahamic mythology. Nor is culture a journey out of chaos into order, as in Greek mythology. We can at best keep expanding our mind, keep

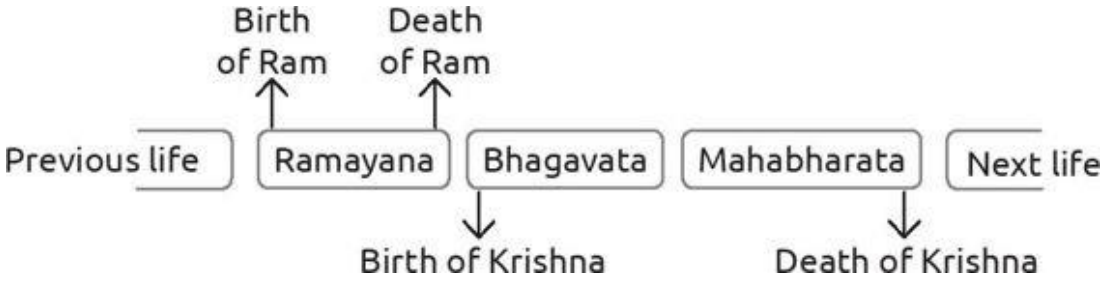
getting more understanding, as we make the journey from limited reality (mithyā) to limitless infinite reality (satya). Wisdom comes with the realization that other people's karma that impacts our life cannot be wished away. And this is most evident in the concept of Rāma Rajya, the 'perfect' kingdom of Rāma described in the Rāmāyāṇa.

In Rāma Rajya, everything is predictable, everything is pure, all wishes are fulfilled and everyone is taken care of. But then a Brāhmaṇa's son dies prematurely, because a 'low-caste' man called Shambuka wants to be a hermit and so has abandoned his vocation. And people gossip about Sitā's stay in Rāvaṇa's palace, and a washerman (dhobi) calls it a 'stain' on the reputation of the Raghu clan. The desires and meanness of others are beyond Rāma's control. To restore perfection, Rāma has to do terrible things: kill an innocent hermit and banish an innocent wife. Aspirations are crushed and people are abandoned, in order to create predictability and purity for the rest. The horrific price of perfection is thus demonstrated. The physical and psychological violence generates more karmic ripples that end up as turbulent waves lashing against the perfection created. Shambuka's cry and Sitā's anguish haunt Rāma Rajya from without. Rāma Rajya turns into rana-bhoomi, under siege by those excluded, like Indra's Svarga surrounded by angry asuras.

Eventually the Treta yuga gives way to Dvapara yuga, where upright men like Bhisma and Karṇa allow the Kauravas to thrive while honest men like Yudhishthira gamble their kingdom and their wife away, even when KṚṢṆA walks the earth.

Does that make the RāMāyāṇa and the Mahābhārata tragedies, since they do not have happy endings? Attempts to classify the epics so are themselves judgemental, against the very spirit in which they were composed. The epics simply end with the death of their protagonists: Rāma dies in Book 7 of the RāMāyāṇa while KṚṢṆA dies in the Mausala Parva, Book 16 of the Mahābhārata; Arjuna dies in Book 17. Rāma walks into the river Sarayu, and a stray arrow kills KṚṢṆA. Both have a smile on their lips when they die for they know death is not the end: another life awaits. Arjuna on the other hand

slips while climing a mountain and dies in disappointment, having failed to reach Svarga.



Beginning and End of Hindu Epics

The Gītā does not aspire for perfection. Hence, there are no rules in The Gītā, only three paths to establish relationships: karma yoga, bhakti yoga and gyāna yoga that deal with human conduct, human emotions and human identity. These three routes are interdependent. One cannot exist without the other. Without karma yoga, we have nothing to give, or receive from, the other. Without bhakti yoga, we are machines that feel nothing for the other. Without gyāna yoga, we have no value, purpose or meaning. There can be no bhakta who does not do or understand. There can be no gyani who does not do or feel. There can be no karmi who does not feel or understand. The optimal functioning of the hands (karma) depends on the head (gyāna) and the heart (bhakti). A yogi simultaneously does, feels and understands.

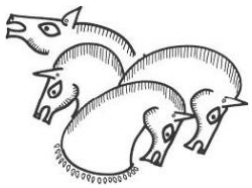
Interdependence of the Three Yogas

KṚṢṆA presents these three paths to Arjuna like a mother lays out food. Arjuna has the option of eating what he feels like, what his body craves for. No matter what he eats, he has no control over the digestion, what his body will finally assimilate. The final outcome is dependent not just on his will (sankalpa)

but also his natural tendencies (guna) and, of course, whatever he is supposed to experience (karma). Hence, KṚṢṆA is not disappointed when Arjuna's doubts and despair resurface again and again. It is how it is supposed to be.

> Arjuna, some discover the divine through meditation and introspection, others decipher it through logic and analysis, others experience it through activity, and still others are introduced to it by listening to others. All are able to overcome the fear of mortality.—*Bhagavad Gītā: Chapter 13, verses 24 and 25 (paraphrased).*

KṚṢṆA knows that in a world without boundaries, there will always be another chance, and then another.



Recommended Reading

For a literal, readable translation of The Gītā without commentary:

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• Nabar, Vṛndā and Tumkur, Shanta. *The Bhagavad Gitā*. Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Classics, 1997. • Menon, Ramesh. *The Shrimad Bhagavad Gītā*. Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2004.
• Miller, Barbara. *The Bhagavad-Gītā*. New York: Bantam Press, 1986.

For a readable translation that also captures the poetic spirit of The Gītā:

• Rao, Mani. *Bhagavad Gītā*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011. • Mitchell, Stephen. *Bhagavad Gītā*. London: Random House, 2000.

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For appreciating how imagination and language (brahmana) play a key role in human development:

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